Bread and Music

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Bread and Music

by peppermintquartz

Summary

Seventeen-year-old Will Graham never makes wishes. If he has any, it's that he wants his dad to stop drinking, a chance to play on a proper piano, and a home where he can have dogs. He doesn't expect any of these to come to pass. After all, this is real life, and he is the weird freak of his school.
Then he lends a familiar face an umbrella, and his entire life is turned upside down.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Bread and Music
Conrad Aiken

Music I heard with you was more than music,
And bread I broke with you was more than bread;
Now that I am without you, all is desolate;
All that was once so beautiful is dead.

Your hands once touched this table and this silver,
And I have seen your fingers hold this glass.
These things do not remember you, belovèd,
And yet your touch upon them will not pass.

For it was in my heart you moved among them,
And blessed them with your hands and with your eyes;
And in my heart they will remember always, —
They knew you once, O beautiful and wise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Thank you for your hard work, Will. Here's your payment." Dr Hannibal Lecter hands over the white envelope, the cash encased within. "I will see you again on Thursday?"

"Yes." Will Graham manages a half-smile, just a twitch of his lips. "Thank you, Dr Lecter."

"Are you certain you don't want a drink before you go? I have juice," the doctor asks.

"Thank you, but no. I don't want to, um. I don't want to dirty your nice floor. Sorry." The seventeen-year-old ducks his head, and stares at his dirty boots, hoping his mortification isn't noticed. The boots are hard-wearing and durable, the only thing he ever felt compelled to save for and purchase. It was not an easy task. His father has an unerring ability to sniff out hidden caches and an even more unerring ability to drink the money dry. The boots are a victory hard-won.

But they are out of place in the calm and severe beauty of Dr Lecter's home. Even from the entryway, Will can see that it is worlds apart from everything Will ever experienced, and he has no desire to scar the lovely hardwood floor or smudge the walls with the grime that clings to him or, heavens forbid, break something priceless.

It's almost a ritual by now: from the first time Will trimmed his yard six weeks ago, Dr Lecter has always offered two drinks, and Will always gives the same response. He would accept, however hesitantly, a glass of fruit juice before he starts, but he never takes the second drink. He arrives, knocks on the front door and sometimes pets the stone lions there, because the things are exotic-looking with their curly manes and bulging eyes, and then goes to the back gate to be let in. The tools he needs are there, in a shed. He never enters the house.

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Hannibal watches the young man leave, his sturdy work boots caked with mulch and soil. Will Graham has a wild grace to him, as though he is part animal, and yet he is conscientious, polite, and hardworking. The doctor likes him. He doesn't usually find young people that interesting; many are plain obnoxious, too preoccupied with their peers' opinions and too self-absorbed.

Will is an anomaly. There is a sadness in his eyes that he hides from the doctor's gaze, and an excess of humility that is not cloying self-pity. He came recommended by Jack Crawford, and for that alone Hannibal had treated Jack and his wife to a lavish dinner.

He does wish that Will would be more accepting of treats, however. The young man is far too thin, and the haggardness of his features is due as much to lack of nourishment as it is to stress.

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By the time he gets home, Will's dad is already well into today's bottle. Will sighs and picks up the mess of papers and empty containers, tossing them into their respective boxes. He will need to bring them to the collection point soon.

"You're home," Will's father says quietly. Dave Graham is a tired man, and he knows that his son can tell. "Long day?"

"Not too bad," says Will. If his dad is asking, then this is a good day. He relaxes and makes himself smile at his parent. "How was work?"

"Another boat came in today. New money, doesn't know a shit about caring for their things." Dave lets his head rest against the back of his chair and groans as he gets to his feet. The bottle is placed on the coffee table. "Play something, will ya, while I fix dinner? I caught some trout earlier."

Will puts his bag down in his corner of the house and tries not to think about the white envelope of money in it. "Sure."

For all his faults, Dave Graham does love his son. They both know that Will can't continue living with Dave like this, and Dave wishes he could have been a better man. Still, he thinks he has done one thing right by Will: the salvaged piano that stands battered but in working condition, and the ten music lessons he managed to eke out enough money for. After the ten lessons, Will learns to play through his own perseverance, and it comforts Dave that at least he has given his only son something beautiful.

Will plays from memory. He can't afford music scores. The former school librarian sometimes printed sheet music for him, but she's retired and the new one is brusque and unfriendly. Notebooks are too precious to use for copying music, so he finds, reads and memorizes complex scores in his head out of necessity.

Today he chooses Chopin, and his fingers dance over the yellowed keys. He does not wince at the many sour notes - getting a piano for his fifteenth birthday had been worth fifteen years without presents, and fifteen more besides. Keeping it in tune is beyond his father, and Will does not have the know-how yet. He will learn; a music shop in town has promised to hire Will during the holidays, and take him on as an apprentice if he's up to it. Will knows he is. He's smart, he has perfect pitch, he loves fixing things. At the moment, though, he has to finish schooling.

He hears his father opening boxes and heating up some oil, and then the sharp tang of lemons pierce the air. Soon the small house by the river smells of fried fish, and sings of *Mazurka in A minor*.

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Thursday comes again, and Will turns up at 4 o'clock, precisely on time. The doctor is waiting for him at the front door with a small, apologetic smile on his face.

"Will, thank you for being punctual. I fear I have an unexpected appointment elsewhere," says Dr Lecter. "I will not be able to provide you with more than a bottle of chilled water."

It is disconcerting to Will for the doctor to be this humble, and he mumbles about coming back another day.

Dr Lecter brushes that aside. "Nonsense. You have other commitments. I will of course not deduct today's fee from the agreed amount."

"I-I-I can't accept that, you don't have to," Will stammers. He glances up at the older man and is taken aback by his kind eyes. "It's fine."

"Forgive my bluntness, Will, but you do not need to feel obligated. You need the money." Dr Lecter's voice is very gentle but not condescending.

Will feels his cheeks burn. Of course he does. It's obvious, from his worn-out flannel shirts to his frayed collars to his sagging backpack. The young man averts his face, now wishing that the ground would open up and swallow him home. He tugs at his sleeve and worries at his lips. There is something humiliating about charity, even from a nice man like Dr Lecter.

"If... if you don't mind," he finds himself saying, "I could, um, I could do the yard work and then, erm, let m-myself out afterwards. I understand if you, um. I mean, it's up to you."

"Of course! I should have thought of that," Dr Lecter pulls out his keys and detaches two, shoving them into Will's hand. "This is for the back gate, and this is for the house. Do help

yourself to anything in the fridge, Will. You need feeding up. Oh, and if I'm not home by the time you have to leave, you can place the keys behind the stone lion with the ball at the front door."

"I won't need the house key-" Will protests feebly, but the psychiatrist's phone rings and he answers it, striding away to his parked car. He waves at Will with his free hand before he goes into the vehicle, phone still cradled to his ear. The keys feel warm by the time the car rolls out of sight, and Will is still at the front door, his free hand resting on the stone lion's head.

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He weeds the yard, and then, feeling a strange sense of intrusion, turns to examine the fenced-off kitchen garden that lies just outside the back doors of the house, where the sun is warmest. He doesn't tend to these; the doctor has told Will that he uses the harvest for his cooking, and prefers to tend to them himself. He can't really picture Dr Lecter as a gardener, given that Will has only ever seen him in three-piece suits in patterns that would have been garish on anyone else. Yet the evidence is in front of his eyes.

Will is used to wild tangled growths - he picks berries and fungi when he strolls along the river with the feral pack that roams the area - but Dr Lecter is very organized. The older man prefers raised beds, apparently, and Will smiles. Perhaps Dr Lecter doesn't like to bend over or squat in the mud. A quarter of the garden is taken up by a cold frame, and Will can see parsley and lettuce growing happily beneath the glass. The rest of the beds are taken up by tomatoes, eggplants, rhubarb and peppers. Will finds the garden almost charming and rustic, a huge contrast to the sophisticated polish that Dr Lecter exudes.

He sighs and runs a tender hand over a deeply red tomato, wondering what its name is, and then turns to leave. He makes sure to check no one is watching when he leaves the keys exactly where he was told.

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His keys are exactly where Hannibal has told Will to place it. The doctor smiles and presses his fingers to them, wishing he knew how to convince Will to keep a set. He is certain that Will has not entered the house at all, despite the opportunity, and a quick sniff confirms that suspicion.

Hannibal sighs. For once he is at a loss. Perhaps he should speak to Dr du Maurier about this.

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There is a pecking order in high school that is difficult to navigate. Being a victim is possibly the worst, because everyone will take it upon themselves to prove he or she is *not* a victim, and turn on the weakest of the lot. Will Graham manages to skirt that label, and chose to be the social pariah instead. it's easier for him. Self-inflicted isolation is not a problem; Will can always escape into the stream in his head, and listen to the rich fullness of water and wood.

His poverty marked him from the day he walked into the classroom, the new boy at age fifteen. Add to that his social anxiety, his reluctance to make eye contact, the glasses too small for his face, and the most damning factor, his keen intelligence.

The first week, the bullies had got hold of him. The top dog then was Manny Kralik, who choked Will and took pictures of the new kid drooling as he tried to breathe. The next day, in the middle of homeroom, Will revealed with shocking calm how frequently Kralik wet his bed, and with a few well-chosen words and a steady gaze made Kralik pee his pants right on the spot. When the humiliated Kralik came after him with a switchblade, Will broke Kralik's wrist in less than a minute. Kralik was suspended for bringing a weapon, and Will suspended for hurting his classmate.

When he returned, he had fresh bruises across his back and legs that he hid from everyone. Dave was a firm believer in corporal punishment. Will shied away from attention and the others soon had new entertainment and gossip, more interesting than that weird psycho boy who knows your darkest secrets.

The taunts have never stopped, however, but Will has learned from the days of grade school to shrug off the words. *'Freak'* is a popular one, and *'psycho'* is of course a crude follow-up. Occasionally he gets '*weirdo*'. There are days his locker is vandalized. Sometimes, when the jocks are bored, they shove him about in passing, but they don't really lay their hands on him. They know better, even if they don't like it. As much as Will looks like a harmless mouse, the young man can bite hard.

He keeps to himself. After his stunt with Kralik, no one wants to be his friend. They are scared of him, and Will thinks that in some ways his classmates are not stupid.

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He knows Abigail Hobbs by sight. She is plain and pretty, with long dark auburn hair and a sweet smile. Will sometimes sees her and her father trudging into the woods with their hunting gear, and sometimes he knows she sees him with his fishing equipment. They don't talk or even exchange glances, but they are aware of each other's existence. She is a year older than he is but looks younger. In school, if they cross paths, there is a barely-there nod to indicate *something*, an acknowledgement or recognition, perhaps, like two wild animals carefully negotiating their territories. They never talk to each other.

On Thursday, he sees her waiting outside the school. She is probably waiting for her father, the way she keeps glancing at her watch. It is getting late and it looks as though it is about to rain. He stares at the clouds, and then at the girl in her simple blue-and-white blouse and jeans and flats, and then looks at his own attire. The rain begins just as he walks up to her.

"Here," he says, unfurling his faded old umbrella and passing it to her. "You need it more."

Before she can say anything, he is running down to the next block, hugging his backpack to his chest.

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Will wishes he had a cell phone so he can apologize to Dr Lecter. No, not really apologize - it's not as though Will could control the weather - but to reschedule. As it is, Will runs determinedly towards Dr Lecter's place. It is a forty-five-minute jog, which isn't usually a problem for Will. But the storm is heavier than he estimated and he can barely see the road in front of him.

Oddly enough, it is the damage to his notes that he feels more upset about than his drenched state. He has taken shelter under a few awnings, but as he neared the doctor's neighborhood, shelter is more and more scarce.

He nearly jumps out of his skin when a car pulls up alongside him. The doctor steps out quickly and he hurries over to Will, his umbrella shielding the boy from the downpour.

"Get in the car," Dr Lecter orders. His tone brooks no argument.

Will is not so proud to reject warmth and help, but he feels distinctly apologetic for ruining the leather seat in the Bentley. He stares at his hands in abject embarrassment, keenly aware that Dr Lecter has turned up the heat and he feels a lot better out of the rain and the cold.

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Hannibal cannot believe what he is seeing. The wipers clear his windscreen again and he is certain that Will Graham is very possibly suicidally stupid. The young man is running in the heavy rain with no thought of his own health. There are some passers-by and no one offers shelter. Hannibal tamps down the anger and quickly pulls up just ahead of Will, and wades through ankle-deep puddles to the boy.

He laments the state of his car seat's leather and the state of his shoes, but at least Will is no longer being drenched. He is shivering, however, and Hannibal turns up the heat and drives home as fast as he can.

The boy needs taking care of, and Hannibal decides that serendipity has placed Will in Hannibal's care, at least for the evening. No way is he going to allow Will to leave before the young man is warm, dry and fed.

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The doctor does not drive Will home, as the young man half-expected. Instead they stop right outside Dr Lecter's mansion. The psychiatrist exits first and then opens the door for Will, who is clutching his ruined backpack against his chest.

"Th-thank you, Dr Lecter," he says through chattering teeth. "I-I can go home from here, t-take the b-b-bus, if you could, um, lend me an umbrella."

"You are going nowhere in that state," Dr Lecter says. He takes Will by an elbow and steers him to the door. Will can't even muster a protest; he is shivering now, the chill seeming to go through his bones, and when the doctor guides him into his foyer, Will can only follow.

He remembers his footwear. "B-b-b-boots," he manages past clenched teeth. "Floor."

"The floor is unimportant," says Dr Lecter. He wrestles the backpack from Will and ignores the squeak about water and hardwood. The boy is made to sit. Will is so mortified about his state of 'drowned rat' completely ruining the doctor's upholstery that he doesn't realize that Dr Lecter has unlaced his boots and removed his socks. "Stay here."

Will is shivering almost violently. His head aches and he tries to clench down on his chattering teeth. He has a vague sense of being wrapped in something large and fluffy, and then being carried to a couch when his legs refuse to support his weight. Dr Lecter strips him of his sodden flannel shirt and tee shirt, and pauses. Then he passes Will another towel to dry his hair with.

"M-my dad." Will rises and stumbles in the same breath. "My dad. He'll b-b-be w-worried."

Pushing Will inexorably back into the cushions, Dr Lecter ignores his words. "Sit down. Put this on. I'll make something hot for you. How do you take your coffee?"

"Wh-what?"

The older man harrumphs, as though in irritation. "Take off the rest of your clothes while I make something warm for you. The robe and pants should keep you dry enough. Don't worry about your father at the moment, Will, you're the one caught in a thunderstorm and possibly coming down with a fever."

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Too many scars litter Will Graham's body. Rage blooms deep inside Hannibal, like ink dropped into a bowl of clear water, even as he starts the coffee maker and pulls out various ingredients for a simple broth.

Those on his thin forearms are easily explained. Self-harm is common, unfortunately, but the scars look old and faded. The cluster of bruises on Will's ribs - protruding almost scarily, and Hannibal forces down more anger - and the many marks of fading bruises and a burn on his back. A brief glimpse is sufficient to burn the image into Hannibal's memory.

He wants to tear the culprit from limb to limb. From the way Will responds to him, Hannibal guesses that it is his father who inflicts such pain.

Are there more? Hannibal wants to find out, but it is not something that he can ask outright. This is Will's first visit. The young man is cold, probably hungry, and maybe overwhelmed. The doctor takes a few calming breaths and then starts his stove.

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Will sinks into the couch. He feels miserable and hates himself for placing himself in such a state. He puts on the blue robe left next to him and then, feeling unaccountably nervous, pulls off his jeans. He towels at his legs, feeling the chill dissipate just a tad, but a tremor runs up his spine.

Take off the rest of your clothes. Will feels nervousness kick into his gut and swallows back the fear. His boxers are clinging to him uncomfortably. Yet he does not want the doctor to see his underwear, even if it is sodden from the rain.

"Will, you idiot, he's not going to eat you," he tells himself. Besides, Dr Lecter has provided pants - soft gray drawstring pants - so it isn't as though the doctor is up to something nefarious. He strips with remarkable efficiency, considering how much his hands are shaking, and buries his faded gray boxers into the wet lump of denim. Just as rapidly he pulls on the drawstring pants, and feels awkward in them. They are soft and thin, and slightly too long in the leg.

Of course they're long in the leg, they're Dr Lecter's. The reprimand also reminds him that he is, for the first time, in the doctor's home.

He looks around, feeling young and stupid as he takes in the rich jewel tones of the walls, the incredible artwork, and the tasteful elegance that breathes opulence instead of overwhelming someone with it. He does not dare move from the couch where he was placed, and soon Dr Lecter emerges with a tray, balancing a bowl, an actual loaf of bread, and a plain white cup that smelled better than any coffee Will has ever drunk.

"I apologize," says Dr Lecter, his brow creasing faintly as he sets the tray down next to Will. "I didn't want to keep you waiting, so I only made a simple soup, and the bread was from this morning so it is cold. I hope it will suffice. Take the coffee first."

Will drinks a little too fast, but moans with how richly bitter the brew is. "This is fantastic coffee, Dr Lecter. Thank you." Then his cheeks color and adds, "I'm sorry. I just wanted to come and reschedule but, um. The rain became heavier than I expected."

"There was no need to come personally," Dr Lecter admonishes gently. "A phone call would have conveyed your message. I believe I gave you my number?"

"Sorry. Y-yes." Will's hands tighten on the cup. "I... I don't have a cell phone." *I don't always have a land line either. Depends on if Dad has paid the bills.* He does not say the words aloud.

The doctor sighs gently and says, "I'll put your clothes into the dryer. Finish your soup, and then call your father to tell him where you are. I'll be in the kitchen."

"I really should-"

"I'd rather you have dinner with me before I drive you home, Will. Allow me that."

"Um, thanks, but there's really no need to-"

"Will." Dr Lecter's tone is firm, his eyes still so very kind. "Drink your soup."

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At a time when every teenager seems permanently grafted to a cell phone, Will Graham not having one tells Hannibal a lot more than the young man probably realizes. Hannibal is

surprised by the strength of his desire to provide Will with one, and to make sure he doesn't go hungry.

In case he starts saying something maudlin or overly intimate, Hannibal picks up the sodden clothing to throw them into the dryer. The clothes are faded, patched, and repaired often; Will likes to take care of what is his.

As the machine begins to rumble, Hannibal is suddenly struck with the realization that everything Will is wearing right now belongs to Hannibal. The psychiatrist's knees grow a little weak, and he has to shake his head at his own obsession. He is more than two decades Will's senior, old enough to be his father (*and a much better one I'd have been than his own,* Hannibal thinks darkly), and he isn't even certain if Will likes him as someone more than a client.

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No one answers the phone, so Will assumes his dad is probably passed out again. He is a little put out, but also relieved. It is barely five in the evening, and if his dad has drunk enough to be unconscious, then this is a bad day. Rainy days are usually bad. Will doesn't really know why, but he knows how his father is during and after storms.

Dr Lecter is in the kitchen, and Will feels intimidated enough by the spacious house to want someone nearby. He pads into the kitchen in bare feet. The psychiatrist is stirring something in a pot vigorously and brightens when he sees Will peeking from the entryway.

"Have you contacted your father?" he asks.

"Uh, yeah, he's, um... he says it's okay to have dinner." Will looks down at the floor. It's not really a lie, he tells himself. When he gets back, he'll have to cook dinner if he wants any, and he'll wake his dad if he does. That never ends well. At least if he has dinner here, he can hide in his tiny room when he gets home and not risk waking his father. His dad won't mind. "Sorry. I didn't mean to, um, to put you to any trouble."

Dr Lecter smiles. He looks very charming and professional in an apron, and Will finds himself smiling back hesitantly. "It is as easy to cook for two as it is to cook for one."

"I'd like to help," says Will shyly. The kitchen is all polished steel, industrial yet welcoming. Will tries not to stare at the array of cooking implements and appliances.

"You're a guest." Dr Lecter tuts at him. Then he looks at Will fidgeting with the sleeves of the bathrobe and relents. "Could you cube that block of cheese? Just eight cubes will do."

Will nods eagerly and shuffles over. Then he remembers that he is wearing Dr Lecter's bathrobe. "Um, I don't want to dirty this..."

"There's a spare apron over there," the doctor says, indicating the location with a jerk of his head. He adds something green to the pot, turns down the heat, and covers it as it simmers. "Here."

Will's face grows hot when the older man whisks the apron around his waist, and then nervous when he helped to fold the sleeves so they will not get in the way. He has forgotten about his scars. The doctor does nothing more than pause when he sees the faded, angry lines along Will's forearms, but Will can sense the displeasure that rolls off of Dr Lecter.

"Sorry. I should've, um. I should've... said something." Will gulps and bites his upper lip.

"Do not apologize, Will," says Dr Lecter, touching Will's cheek with a finger. "Come. I will need the cubes for the salad. Dinner is almost ready."

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The rain has washed away most of the sweat that usually clings to Will, and Hannibal takes a discreet sniff when he ties the apron around the young man. Will is earthy and delicate, and Hannibal wishes he was ten years younger. He sternly reminds himself that Will is only seventeen, and he is already forty-one.

Will sets to his assigned task with care and soon sets the cubes aside. He is then told to shred salad greens into a large serving bowl.

"I do wish I have a better spare apron that that one," says Hannibal, his lips curbing in a tease, "but my friend thought I needed to be less formal in the kitchen. It hasn't worked, alas."

Will glances down and then grins broadly. The apron is emblazoned with the words 'Kiss The Cook!' and a set of lips is placed suggestively where the chef's crotch would be.

"Quite a cliched gag gift, isn't it?" Will remarks, not really heedful of the placement. He is focused on the work Hannibal has given him.

The doctor sighs inwardly. At the very least, he has the memory of this: a smiling Will Graham, in his clothes, in his kitchen.

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"I wasn't expecting company," Dr Lecter admits, "so the fare today is rather plain. Here."

He guides Will to a chair at a large dining table, on which is an extravagant centerpiece of tropical fruit and chrysanthemums. Will is feeling out of his depth - he feels as though he's falling into the Mariana Trench. So overwhelmed by the immense dining room, he doesn't notice the dinner until it is placed in front of him.

"You were lucky I had to rush out to get an ingredient I forgot, otherwise you'd have had to trudge even longer in the rain. As it is, I don't think you'll come down with anything." Dr Lecter adds a serving of salad with the cheese that Will cubed. "I hope you like rabbit."

"I'm not picky," says Will. He risks a quick smile. "Can't afford to be. "

There is that odd disapproval again, and Will shrinks into himself. He has embarrassed himself in front of the doctor already, what with the drenching, and now he has to stick his foot in his mouth.

"Sorry. I mean, I do like it."

Dr Lecter sighs. "Will, don't apologize for something that is not your fault."

"Sorry." Will is mortified by his apologies now and clenches his fists, his nails cutting into his palms. He swallows dryly and then starts on dinner, not wanting to see the pity in the doctor's kind eyes. The first few mouthfuls are gulped down too fast, but then his tastebuds prompt him to say, "This is delicious!"

"Thank you," says Dr Lecter, a glimmer of genuine pleasure shining from his eyes. "I do enjoy cooking for appreciative appetites. If you want more, please help yourself. I prefer not to have to deal with leftovers."

Will knows the doctor is trying to salvage Will's pride and he is grateful for it. It sounds so much better if he's helping the doctor clear off food he does not need. Dr Lecter is watching him, and Will flushes without quite knowing why. To compensate, he drinks the water a little too quickly and has to cough to clear his throat.

"Thank you," the boy finally says, and finishes his dinner. He has second helpings.

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Dr Lecter sends Will home. While Will is not materialistic, he is terribly conscious about the tiny house he lives in. Compared to the grand mansion that the doctor resides in, Will knows his place is like a hovel. No lights are on but Will is welcomed by five furry bodies, flinging themselves at him.

"Are these your dogs?" asks Dr Lecter, staying out of the way of happy canines.

"No, they're feral," says Will, smiling widely. At least something misses him. "I sometimes save scraps for them, and when I go for walks they come with me. I think they consider me part of their pack."

Dr Lecter looks around, taking in the squalor. Will tries not to mind. "Your father doesn't seem to be home, Will."

"He's probably asleep," says the young man. He bobs his head at Dr Lecter and says, very sincerely, "Thank you for your hospitality, Dr Lecter. I'm sorry about ruining your couch and, um, muddying your floor."

"Don't apologize, Will. It was more important to get you dry." The doctor waits until Will has gone up to his door. "I'll see you next Thursday then. Stay for dinner."

He drives off before Will can find a reason to protest.

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The conditions Will lives in are appalling. There are broken-down boat motors and a beat-up old car; the external paint on the walls is clearly peeling and Hannibal is half-convinced the entire structure will cave in on Will.

Yet Hannibal can't shake the image of Will smiling at the flea-bitten dogs , smiling as though he does not have a single care in the world. It was breathtaking. The psychiatrist did hold his breath then, afraid to startle the young man out of his joy.

I will give anything to have you smile at me like that, Hannibal's mind whispered, and the doctor forces the thought away. Twenty-four years is far too large an obstacle to surmount, and Hannibal does not like getting his hopes up.

Still, later that evening, he places Will's joyful expression in a crystal globe and decants his scent into a tiny perfume bottle in his memory palace, and sets both in the sunlit greenhouse wild with flowers and herbs.

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On Friday, Abigail returns his umbrella with a thank-you note taped to the handle. He would have found it charming but he, like all the other students, are preoccupied with the news that a sophomore, Cassie Boyle, has been murdered. Rumors fly thick and fast, but Will wonders who Cassie was and what she looks like now. The school holds a special assembly.

The principal drones on about being safe and staying in groups; Will snorts and hunches his shoulders. He thinks about using his meager savings to get new notebooks; all of his are waterlogged and even after drying, nothing is salvageable. But that is not the main issue he thinks about.

For once his belly isn't rumbling with discontent and emptiness. He had eaten very well at Dr Lecter's, and slept very well also. This morning he told his father that the doctor wants him to stay for dinner every Thursday.

"Eh? What's he want?" Dave Graham asked.

That has bothered Will the entire day. By the time the students are dismissed, Will can't remember anything the teachers have said, and he is already jogging towards Dr Lecter's place before he realizes it.

Will the doctor be in? Will doesn't know. He knows there is a likelihood that Dr Lecter is out at his office and that he may have to wait on the stoop, but he has to know before the end of the day.

His father's question nags at him. Will sits next to one of the lions and leans against it. His left hand starts scrubbing absently over the coils of the stone mane, as though it was a dog, and settles in to wait.

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Hannibal is half-convinced he is dreaming. Why is Will Graham on his front step? Is Will waiting for him?

In repose, the young man's stress lines are less obvious, but the tension in his brow and jaw does not fade. His hands are lax, open on his lap, and Hannibal wishes he can pick them up

and kiss the center of each palm. He settles for watching Will sleep, observing the slow rise and fall of the thin chest.

It is probably two or three minutes before Hannibal reaches out to touch Will's shoulder.

*****

Will wakes up to Dr Lecter shaking his shoulder. "Will, have you been waiting long?"

The young man blinks and then bolts to his feet, almost bowling the doctor over. He hastily grabs Dr Lecter's arm and keeps him from toppling over. To Will's shock, it is already late in the evening and he will have to rush home if he doesn't want to be walking in the dark.

"I'm sorry," he blurts out, and then backpedaled. Dr Lecter doesn't like him apologizing. "I mean, I-I didn't mean to, um, fall asleep. I was waiting for you."

"That much is obvious," says Dr Lecter with a small smile. "Come in."

"Um, I-I should be going home. I just wanted to, uh..." Will fidgets. "Um. Thank you, for last night."

"You've already thanked me, Will."

"And..." Will inhales deeply and makes himself look at the older man. Eye contact makes him uncomfortable, but he doesn't want to be rude. "I-I can't stay. For dinner. On Thursday. I am, um. I'm really sorry. My dad..." he trails off, not sure how he can phrase his dad's doubt

The disappointment doesn't really show in Dr Lecter's face as it does in his eyes. He nods minutely and says, "Well, I appreciate you coming here to tell me that. Now I should send you home."

Will's eyes widened. His cheeks pinked. "There's no need, sir, I can take the bus."

"Nonsense. I have a car, and it will be really late if you take the bus. Come on." Dr Lecter then smiles, showing some teeth this time. "You were raised in the south?"

"Hmm?" Will is still thinking of reasons to not have Dr Lecter drive his Bentley to his neck of the woods.

"You addressed me as 'sir'. That's not common around here," says the doctor. His hand lands between Will's shoulder blades and gently propels him towards the gleaming car.

Will licks his lips. A comfortable car versus a hot bus, and a long trek up a dark path. He swallows his pride. "We lived for some time in Louisiana. Dad liked it."

"So why come north? Maryland is vastly different in climate."

"I dunno. Dad never talks about it."

The car purrs into life and Will takes the time to appreciate the interior. The seats are buttery soft leather, and Will runs his palms over his seat, grimacing when he recalls how his sodden state yesterday probably damaged it. He glances sidelong at the doctor who is handling the car like it is an extension of himself.

"I don't wish to be rude," says Dr Lecter, "but how do you manage, traveling to and from school?"

Will shrugs. "I wake at four, take the earliest bus, and wait for the school to open. After school I do some odd jobs - yard work at the moment - for an hour or two before I head home."

"And your meals?"

"Whatever we catch or buy prepackaged." Will shuffles his boots against the carpeting. "Please don't judge."

The doctor sighs. "You're still growing. This isn't healthy."

"My dad's doing what he can."

Dr Lecter looks over at the teenager. "I didn't say anything against him."

"It was implied," says Will, suddenly angry and upset. He pushes away the emotions. "I don't want to talk about it. Please."

The psychiatrist turns onto the freeway and they sit in tense silence. Will tugs at his sleeve. He hates everything about his shabby clothes, his dirty and sturdy boots, his backpack. He hates that he has to rewrite all of his notes from memory, that his locker is vandalized so often that he can't leave anything inside, that he has to use part of his savings to buy something as stupid as notepaper just because he chose to be chivalrous. The resentment builds and gnaws at him, and he chokes down the sob that almost bursts from his throat.

He doesn't hide the sound well enough. Dr Lecter takes one glance and then pulls out of the freeway and slows to a stop in an open-air parking lot of a Walmart. It is a dark part of the lot and Will is grateful for the shelter of the shadows; if the doctor had parked near the entrance, Will knows he will have to quit working for Dr Lecter. He wouldn't be able to swallow the shame. He buries his face in his hands and hunches over his knees. He can feel the tears and he does not want to cry, not in front of this man who has been so *kind* to him.

"Will?" The doctor sounds concerned. "Will, was it what I said? I'm sorry, I meant no disrespect-"

"No, no it's not you," says Will, his voice thick with suppressed emotion that is trying to claw out from his chest. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to get... um. I don't. I don't want... I can't. Just - just let me, um, let me. I'll be okay. I will. I just. Need some time. Please. I'm sorry."

He feels the doctor's hesitation, and then he feels a firm hand petting him awkwardly on his head. Will almost laughs. It is as though the doctor is trying to soothe a wounded animal and

isn't certain how to proceed. Will supposes that the older man isn't wrong.

"You don't have to be okay, Will. It's all right to not feel okay." Dr Lecter's hand pauses on the back of Will's neck. He then asks, very quietly, "Do you want me here right now?"

Will's breath catches. After an intense internal struggle, he nods tightly. He doesn't trust himself to speak. The doctor resumes stroking Will's hair until the young man gets a hold of himself and straightens from his fetal curl. "Sorry," he says. "I didn't mean to... to worry you."

"Someone should be," says the doctor gravely. He does not start the car. "Please allow me to help."

Will shakes his head vehemently. "I can manage."

"You are hardly more than a child yourself," says Dr Lecter, "and you push yourself too much and don't take care of yourself enough. What kind of doctor am I to ignore such distress?"

"The kind that's not mine," Will snaps, injured pride retaliating with its fangs bared.

Hurt flashes over the doctor's gaze, but he presses on. "Will, all I ask is for you to allow yourself to have a good meal at least once a day. You can come to my place to study, and have dinner, and I can drive you home every night."

"No. I don't want *charity,* Dr Lecter," Will says. He hates the word, feels it burn like acid on his tongue.

"It is not charity, it is concern." Dr Lecter steels his features. "If you will not listen to reason, then perhaps I can convince your father."

Will does not want his father to meet Dr Lecter. They are as different as a pebble and the sun. His father would become furious that someone else is prying, and he would drink more, and it's never clear whether Dave Graham is in a good mood when he reaches the bottom of a bottle.

"Please don't," Will begs, but Dr Lecter does not answer at all.

*****

Will clings to his pride like it is his only possession, and Hannibal wants to tear apart the man that made Will so frightened and resentful of accepting aid. His fingers are taut on the wheel and he drives a touch too fast, but Will is hurting beside him and refusing much-needed help.

Hannibal has known poverty and starvation. He knows in such extremes how far a person will resist bending, just because to bend means to break. Hannibal has no such desire; he wants Will to flourish, away from this squalor and ugliness. Will appreciates beauty, that much is certain. His continual refusal to enter Hannibal's home just because his boots are for outdoor tramping has told Hannibal much. He also has seen Will marveling at the opulence of his home, his gaze falling on the places where Hannibal spent much of his time on. Will's senses of the aesthetic are keen; burying them beneath all this dirt is a waste of potential.

He wants to see Will well-fed, the hollows of his cheeks filled out; he wants to see Will in comfortable and stylish clothes; he wants to see Will learn to appreciate haute cuisine and fine wine. He wants Will to play with a pack of dogs that are his own, not feral mongrels with various diseases. He wants Will to be free to read everything in Hannibal's library and to ask Hannibal anything.

The desire to see someone else *happy* is unfamiliar to Hannibal, and he turns sharply down the path towards Will's house. He is not usually bothered by other people's emotions, but unassuming, unappreciated, underfed Will Graham has somehow captured his heart and his mind.

Hannibal grits his teeth. He needs time.

*****

The lights are not on. There are no dogs to welcome Will.

The silence makes Will nervous. He shifts his backpack and walks towards the screen door. Dr Lecter has turned off his engine and is following him. Will prays that his father is not at home. He does not want his father to get agitated. The last time, his dad threatened to burn the piano, though afterwards he tells Will he didn't mean it.

"Dad?" he calls out tremulously. The doors aren't locked. There isn't anything to steal, not really, other than a few empty cans and bottles, but Dave Graham always locks it. "Dad, I'm home. Sorry I'm so late."

He senses the shape hurling itself at him and turns just in time. A knife swings past him, nicking his cheek.

"Dr Lecter run!" Will shouts, and then someone grabs him from behind.

The knife is at his throat and he hears the attacker shouting. Will struggles, unwilling to submit. He can't hear what the man is yelling and the knife is too close, flashing on his peripheral vision.

Dr Lecter is at the doorway, his form broad and imposing. "Let Will go."

"Oh no," snarls the attacker. "No, he'll steal her. He and all of them, they want her to leave me."

Will has no idea what the crazed man is muttering about. The knife is too close; Will feels trapped and panic surges in his veins. He suddenly bites down on the arm holding him, using all his strength, sinking his teeth down as far as they could go.

The man yowls and shoves Will away on instinct. Dr Lecter catches him and then shields him when the attacker barrels at them.

*****

Hannibal can recognize that something is off, and discreetly pulls on his leather gloves. Will goes into the house before Hannibal can warn him, and then he hears Will shouting for him to run. Hannibal Lecter strides through the doorway instead, obstructing the escape route.

"How dare you! How dare you try to steal her from me!" The attacker is an average-sized man, thinning hair and crazed eyes. His knife is perilously close to Will's face but Will is fighting back beautifully, a snarling, snapping beast, keeping the blade from his throat.

"Let Will go," Hannibal orders. Rage settles cold along his arms and shoulders when he sees the thin trail of blood on Will's face. Hannibal growls.

"Oh no," the man says viciously, "no, he'll steal her, he and all of them. They want her to leave me."

Hannibal is about to pounce when Will's teeth flashes and sinks into the attacker's arm. With a howl, the wild man tries to pull his arm away and pushes Will towards Hannibal. The doctor catches him just when he notices the attacker lunge forward.

The blade slices past his shoulder, nearly impaling Will below him. Hannibal roars and whirls around, his hand gripping the other man's wrist, twisting it until the knife fell, the wrist broke, and the doctor hears a satisfying scream uncurl from the man's throat. He smashes the man's nose with a knee and slams him into the floor, straddling his chest to pin him. Hannibal unleashes his rage and punches the man, again and again, each crack of cartilage and bone a payment for hurting Will Graham.

"Dr Lecter!"

The anguished cry pulls Hannibal back from his ice-cold fury. Will is shaking, kneeling where Hannibal left him sprawled earlier, and he is staring, wide-eyed and horrified at the carnage Hannibal is inflicting. The sight of Will frightened of him sobers Hannibal instantly. The attacker is unconscious, possibly dying; Hannibal did not check his strength earlier, and he doesn't care about this mad man.

"Will, hush, it's okay, I'm here," Hannibal says, getting to his feet and returning to the shell-shocked young man. Impulsively he caresses Will's cheek with its trail of blood, the blood on his gloved knuckles smearing over Will. "Hush, it's okay, it's safe now."

They stand, and Will eyes the knife with a shudder. "Where's my dad?"

*****

Jack Crawford comes along once the local police force is certain the FBI isn't there to steal their case. He spies Hannibal standing to one side, giving his statement; Will Graham is leaning on Hannibal's Bentley, a shock blanket draped over his thin shoulders.

"I heard that you just almost killed a man in self-defense," Jack says without preamble once the officer is finished.

Hannibal works his jaw. "Not precisely self-defense," he says, glancing at Will behind Jack. "The man came at Will with a knife. I had to protect him."

"Who is he?" Jack asks. "He was here for Will?"

"Yes," Will Graham answers unexpectedly. He pulls the blanket around him tightly.

Hannibal pulls Jack aside, further from Will. "I looked around. Jack, that man slaughtered Will's father."

"You looked- Dr Lecter, you contaminated a crime scene. You know better than that!" Jack barely bothers to keep his voice low. Some of the police officers glance their way.

"It was either me or Will looking. I didn't want him traumatized." Hannibal turns again to observe the young man huddled against the car. Will looks very young then, and lost. "They took his statement, they processed him for evidence, and now they want him at the station, answering more questions. Jack, help me call these vultures off for a night. Let the boy rest; he needs it."

Jack considers. There is something about Hannibal Lecter at that moment that Jack has never seen before, a kind of vulnerability. He looks between Hannibal and Will, and then he understood. He leans in and murmurs, "Hannibal, he is only seventeen."

Hannibal's face twists at the implied accusation. "I'm aware of that," he sputters, as near to losing his temper with Jack as he has ever been. "I am not one to take advantage. But he needs a friend now, and I have guest rooms."

"I apologize. I meant no discourtesy." Jack inclines his head. He goes to the detective in charge and talks to her quietly, all the while keeping an eye on Hannibal and Will. The two converse, neither of them impinging on the other's personal space. The detective finally agrees, though her reluctance shows.

*****

Hannibal does not talk with Will until they are safely ensconced in the doctor's house. Even then, Hannibal mainly talks *at* Will, guiding him to the guest room and showing him the guest shower. Will thanks him quietly.

The doctor scrounges up some casual wear from the depths of his extensive closet. He will have to take Will shopping tomorrow, he thinks with something nearing giddiness, and he will get to feed Will up with healthy, nutritious food, see that potential grow into being. He takes the clothes to the guest room and almost has a heart attack when he opens the door.

Will is already stretched out on the bed, face down atop the covers, and he does not have a stitch on. Hannibal places his clothes on the dresser and looks around for Will's dirty laundry; he finds them stuffed into the trash. Unsure if the young man meant to discard them, Hannibal decides to leave the dirty clothes where they are.

He pulls out a spare blanket to cover Will with. The young man stirs and sits up, uncaring of his nudity. His eyes are wet, his lashes glistening with tears. Will whispers, "All I did was lend her an umbrella."

Hannibal blinks. He gestures for Will to slide in under the sheets, and the young man obeys. Hannibal sits on the edge of the bed and brushes damp hair from Will's brow. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"I don't know." Will covers his eyes with the back of his hands and a wrecked sob escapes him. Words spill out of him, careless and confused. "I don't understand. All I did was lend her an umbrella, and now my dad is dead. I don't... I don't. God, I don't understand. Is this punishment for a single day of not being hungry? Of being warm, of being cared for? I don't - was it me? Because I hated my dad for everything I didn't have? I loved my dad, it was only for a day, I don't *understand*-"

Curling to his side, his face buried into Hannibal's thigh, Will weeps as the words tumble out and the doctor lets him. Better to let the river run than to dam it all behind a stoic mask. The young man cried until his voice gave out. Hannibal pets him on the head and waits until the crying is less wretched before he pulls away slightly to look at Will.

"No one understands, Will, but none of this is your fault," says Hannibal as gently as he could. He brushes the stickiness of tears from Will's face. "If I had come home earlier, you might be dead. As it is, you are not, and I am selfishly glad that you are still a part of this world. I'm sorry for your loss; I wish there is something I can do to make up for it."

Will sniffs and tries to smile, but it comes across as a grimace. "Th-thank you. And sorry for, um, getting snot and tears all over your pajamas."

"I've had worse stuff in surgery," says Hannibal, and risks cupping Will's cheek. "Good night. Do try to rest."

"Can you-" Will catches himself and shakes his head. "Good night."

Hannibal cocks his head. "What is it you want, Will?"

He sees Will hesitate, but his heart warms when the young man finally whispers, "Please sit here until I'm asleep, if that isn't too much bother for you."

Chapter End Notes

Mazurka in A minor, Op.67, No.4

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I'm being swallowed by marshmallows.

The first coherent thought jolts Will awake in an unfamiliar bed. He almost panics, until he remembers where he is and why he's there. He sits up and rubs over his eyes, feeling their soreness and rawness from extensive crying, and has to take a few deep breaths to calm down again. His sinuses are terribly blocked up. Still, this is not a day of rest for him. He knows that the police wants him in for further questioning, though they have already collected evidence from him last night.

Will looks at himself in the mirror and grimaces. He is a mess. There is a bruise just starting to form where the murderer grabbed him, and a cut on his face. The forensic scientist that he was handed to last night before they took his statement had taken photos of his raw neck, and the blood on his face. They also took his jacket, Will recalls. Something about blood spatter.

The rest of his clothes are in the trashcan in the bathroom. He doesn't want to look at them ever again, but he has no other clothes. Looking around the bathroom, he spies a plain white robe and pulls it on, belting it tightly.

Fuck, he is really thin. He looks like a scarecrow in it. Now he examines the bathroom and guest room more closely. The bathroom is tiled in black and slate gray, and the fittings are silver and white. The sink is set into the counter, the mirror a single tall rectangle that shields the light set behind it. The shower had been spacious, and Will remembers he had been surprised that water had rained down on him and not from the shower head he had been holding. Probably because he had used the wrong tap. It had felt like he was standing in the open, letting rain fall on his body.

The guest room is not large, but it has a huge bed - king sized? queen sized? - with an ebony frame. The walls are also in gray, but a saturated gray that softens the reds and golds that are used as accents around the room. There is a nightstand, a narrow closet, and a small table, just large enough to put a laptop on it, perhaps. To Will, this feels less of a room than it does a suite. He wonders how often Dr Lecter uses the room for his friends; there is a faintly dusty smell.

Will's face grows hot from embarrassment when he remembers that he had been utterly nude when Dr Lecter came in last night. Then he had cried like a child against Dr Lecter's leg. And he remembers how he had climbed under the blankets and asked the older man to sit with him until he had slept. He is still naked now, under this flimsy robe, and he doubts he'll be allowed into his house for his other clothes.

He brushes his teeth with more vigor than necessary and tries to ignore both the sourness in the pit of his belly and the blood that he spits into the sink. This feels too much like a dream

to be a dream. His fingers tighten on the counter, and his pulse races as he considers what they will do to him now. He's seventeen and has nothing to his name.

It's going to be a year before he's a legal adult.They might put him into a foster home.

The thought makes him sick.

There is a knock on the door. "Will? May I come in?"

Will jolts and his right hand touches the knot on his belt. *Stupid. If he wanted to take advantage, last night would have been perfect. Get a grip. He's a good man.* Will opens the door and is greeted with a tray and Dr Lecter.

"I made breakfast," the doctor says unnecessarily. He sounds assured and confident, but there is an underlying... something. At the smell of food, Will's stomach growls, an abrupt reminder that he hasn't eaten since the paltry school lunch yesterday. His cheeks grow warm but Dr Lecter only ushers him to the small table inside the guest room and sets the tray down. "I hope you don't mind coffee, eggs, and toast."

"No, it's... it's good." The toast smells heavenly. Will sits and devours the food, and it is only when he's sipping his coffee after clearing the delicious scrambled eggs and fresh toast (actual butter! Will wants to cry again) that the young man notices the odd way Dr Lecter is staring. "Th-thank you. For breakfast and... and last night."

"You're welcome." The psychiatrist seems touched by Will's gratitude. "Mr Crawford wants us to go to his office for a bit. Are you up to it?"

Will gulps down his coffee. It is every bit as good as the last time he drank it. He wishes his father had a chance to try it, but that is impossible now, isn't it?

"Why?" he asks instead. "What does Mr Crawford want me for?"

"All he would tell me was that he needs to talk to you about Abigail Hobbs."

*****

Hannibal can pinpoint the moment Will shrinks into his shell again. The edge of the young man's hunger has been dulled, but he will probably not be able to take another bite until dinner. The doctor is fine with that.

He is not fine with the stark bruises now starting to blossom on Will's neck where the wretched murderer had throttled him, nor with the slash over Will's cheek. He is not fine with the near-skeletal thinness of Will's wrists where they protrude from the voluminous sleeves of the bathrobe.

Will pokes at the crumbs on his plate. "I don't have anything to wear, Dr Lecter," he says, his gaze darting to the bathroom, possibly thinking of the discarded clothing.

"I think, under these circumstances, you may want to call me Hannibal." The older man smiles and takes the tray. "You should find a change of clothes in the closet."

*****

Will tests the name under his breath. *Hannibal*.

It is foreign and it fits. Will can't picture Dr Lecter with any other name, and has even more difficulty picturing himself being comfortable enough to use it. He knows that is Dr Lecter's name, of course, since it is on his name card, given to Will when they first met, but his mind kept insisting on 'Dr Lecter' or 'Dr Hannibal Lecter'.

The clothes are hanging inside the closet, and there is also a small box which holds navy wool socks and - Will blushes - boxer briefs, still in their packaging. He puts the dark blue shirt on and buttons it quickly, and leaves it untucked over the dark jeans inside. It is slightly too loose, but Dr Lecter has provided a belt. Will doubts that any of these things belong to the older man. He cannot imagine Dr Lecter in anything as casual as jeans. It makes Will smile briefly. He doesn't check his reflection in the mirror, though he does consider rolling up the sleeves. He leaves them long though.

His scars are not for everyone.

When he leaves the room, he realizes the doctor has been waiting for him, and that it seems to be rather too bright outside the full-length windows.

"What time is it?" Will asks, suddenly realizing that he has not checked.

"Nearly noon."

Will has never slept in so late before. His expression probably tells the doctor exactly how surprising this is for the teenager, but Dr Lecter does not comment.

*****

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It is stressful to watch Will being questioned by Jack Crawford.

Hannibal is made to wait outside while Will is in Jack's office. At least they are not treating the young man as a suspect, though Jack's body language seemed to convey that message regardless. He can hear snippets; Jack's voice is sonorous, so his questions are audible, but Will keeps his voice soft. Hannibal guesses that Will sensed that this is the easiest way to keep Jack on an even keel.

"How do you know Abigail Hobbs?"

"Were you close friends?"

"Did you know her father?"

"Have you ever spoken to Abigail's father?"

"Have you ever seen her father behaving in a suspicious way?"

The man has no finesse, Hannibal thinks with growing ire, and if Alana Bloom had not appeared as she does Hannibal might have resorted to physically dragging Jack away from Will Graham. Still, he holds his peace. He is, after all, a consultant with the FBI, and he does not wish to risk that relationship. It has been exceedingly useful to have a foot in this particular door.

Alana is all floral and steel, and Hannibal bestows a pleased smile upon seeing her. She is as close to a friend as he can consider having one. She touches his arm. "I hear you may be charged for assault."

"They won't," says Hannibal. "The man killed his wife, Will's father, and almost killed his daughter and Will. I acted in the boy's defense. I doubt there is anyone who truly wants to persecute me. And if what Garrett Jacob Hobbs truly did harm the other eight girls, then charging me will seem ludicrous."

"How is he?" Alana peers at Will. "He is your gardener, right?"

"He's just lost his father," says Hannibal gravely. "How do you think?"

Alana frowns at Jack looming over Will. Hannibal wonders what she sees: a frightened child? a lost young man? He doesn't ask. He doesn't want the question turned back on himself, and psychiatrists are notorious for it.

The woman exhales heavily. "He's going too far." She stalks out of the room, Hannibal on her heels, and raps on the door.

Jack opens it. "Dr Bloom."

"Let me speak to him," she says, not asking for permission. "You're being too hard on the boy."

Hannibal notes the word, and thinks about Will stretched out naked on the guest bed last night, scarred and exhausted and trusting. He thinks about the grief pouring out of Will, and how hot his hands had been on Hannibal's thigh. He thinks about the soft gray drawstring pants he loaned Will on Thursday, where it is folded on a chair in Hannibal's room on top of his usual bathrobe. He thinks about Will huddled up, soaked and bashful, and about Will vicious and terrified, sinking his teeth into his father's murderer.

He thinks all of this and his expression never shifts from cool disapproval.

Jack wants to argue, but better and more obstinate men have fallen before the face of Alana's determination. He steps aside, and lets Alana in.

*****

Will likes the lady who walks in. She has rich, dark hair and a kind smile. Her mouth looks very kissable, and Will colors at the thought. He drinks the horrible coffee that Mr Crawford gave him, and thinks, fleetingly, of the sumptuous coffee that Dr Lecter has.

"Hello Will. I'm Dr Alana Bloom," she says, her voice mellow. Will can imagine people listening to her, opening up to her. "I'm a psychiatrist."

"Hello Dr Bloom. Will Graham."

"I know. I'm sorry for your loss," she says quietly and sincerely, though she knows nothing about Will and his father.

"Thank you." Will thinks that, had he been older, he might have asked her out on a date. "I... I'm still processing it. I never saw his body."

"I was told that it would be better if you don't."

"That bad, huh?"

Dr Bloom made a face. "Do you know why he went after your father?"

Will shakes his head. "He didn't go after my dad. He was waiting for me." He can still hear the harsh breathing, smell the sour sweat, see the glint of the knife. "H-he said I was trying to steal her away. He's fucking crazy."

"Why was he waiting for you, Will?" Dr Bloom asks.

"Because I lent her an umbrella." Off Dr Bloom's look, Will explains, "I lent Abigail Hobbs an umbrella on Thursday. It was raining and she needed it more than I did. I passed it to her and I ran, because I was expected at Dr Lecter's place, and I had to reschedule because of the rain, and he was kind to me and let me in and dried my clothes and made dinner for me and drove me home and I just-"

To his humiliation, tears spring to his eyes again and he swipes at them angrily.

Dr Bloom is very good at what she does. She slides a pack of tissues across the table and says, "How are you feeling, Will?"

Will considers lying, but there isn't any reason to lie, is there? Mr Crawford prodding and poking at him, as though Will made Abigail's father murder people. Dr Bloom looking at him in pity is not helping either. He's sick of pity. He's tolerated it all his life, shifting from school to school, the pity from well-meaning and hapless adults who don't see that Will is perfectly all right living a semi-nomadic life with his dad, can't see that his dad is trying, he did try to quit the bottle, it's not his dad's fault that Will is too sensitive to other people's feelings or that Will can always, always tell if a person is lying from their eyes, not his dad's fault that Will can't keep out of fights. It's not as though Will could have just walked away and left her to soak in the rain, she's a *girl* and she needed it more than he did, damn it, and it's not his fault that her dad's a psycho who's probably killed the other girls for fun, like they are hunting trophies or something-

He flings the coffee to the floor, nearly hitting Dr Bloom's feet. He wants to say he's sorry but the words rush out without thought.

"I'm angry! I'm angry and confused as fuck! I - don't - understand!" Will yells. It feels good to shout, as though all the emotions from last night have been bloating up within him and are now finally exploding from him in a ghastly outburst of words. He doesn't stop. "I just lent her an umbrella! A goddamn *umbrella!* I was being nice. And then someone was nice to me, you know? Dr Lecter was kind to me. Like I was being rewarded. Like it's karma or something. I gave someone what I can't afford, and for once I'm rewarded for it. I get a good dinner, a really good dinner, not just filling but delicious, something that kept me full till morning. I've never - I've never had that. To wake up not because of a growling stomach but because of my crappy alarm. It's supposed to be like that, being rewarded for being good. And that's not true, is it?"

By then his shouts have diminished to anguished whispers.

"Why do you think that's not true, Will?" asks Dr Bloom. She takes one of his hands and squeezes it. She seems unperturbed by his outburst, and he is grateful that she does not blame him.

"Because my dad was murdered. I lent her an umbrella and my dad got murdered because of it and it's *my fault*-" Will's voice broke again and he brings his knees up to press his face into them.

*****

At that moment, Hannibal wishes he could go in and hold Will, let him unload his sorrow, but he can't. His fists clench in his pockets. Alana can and does, patting his hair. Hannibal senses his irrational possessiveness and leashes it.

"It's not your fault, Will, it isn't. Garrett Jacob Hobbs is the one at fault."

"Then why isn't he dead?" Will lashes out bitterly. "Why isn't he dead instead of my dad, what has my dad done?"

Hannibal remembers the scars and bruises all over Will's body, and clenches his jaw. If he had had his way... *You were lucky that Hobbs got to you first*, Hannibal tells the image of Will's father in his head.

Unaware of Hannibal's thoughts, Jack leans over and says, "Can you verify that Will was with you?"

"Yes," says Hannibal curtly. "If you ask the people inside Cafe Rochelle, they can also tell you that they didn't offer a drenched young man any shelter and that I stopped and bundled him into my car. Or would you like to search my premises? The cushioned chair in the foyer is still damp."

"And yesterday? Was he with you?"

"I got home at seven-thirty. I found him on my porch," said Hannibal. He turned to regard Jack coldly. "Would you like to question my neighbors? I'm sure Mrs Turner will be more than happy to regale you with gossip."

"I mean no offense, Dr Lecter. I do have eight girls still missing."

"What do you expect him to know? He's only seventeen." Hannibal throws Jack's words back in his face. "He blames himself for his father's death. Would you have him blame himself for the other girls? They are not his responsibility."

"He has to know something," Jack insists. "Why would Hobbs come after him otherwise?"

"He already told you. He lent the Hobbs girl an umbrella." Hannibal exhales slowly. "Jack. He knows nothing. His life is dictated by necessity. You yourself have known him for longer than I have."

And did nothing to help him, Hannibal's mind adds. But that is hardly Jack's fault; Will hides under layers and layers, under politeness and aloofness. The young man doesn't accept hospitality beyond the bare minimum, rejects comfort, and is perpetually alone. No one has got close enough to see the scars.

If Will had not lent his umbrella to the girl and got himself caught in a storm, Hannibal would not have known either the extent of the harm inflicted on Will. His heart clenched at the thought of Will suffering slowly and daily, worn down to a nub by loneliness and lack.

No. Hannibal will not allow that to happen ever again. He turns to Jack.

"So what happens now to Will Graham?"

*****

Will has no living relative. He has nowhere to go but back to that ramshackle house in the middle of nowhere, and thinking about going back to where his dad died sends something crawling up his spine.

"You can stay in my guest room until you make a decision," Dr Lecter tells him over lunch in a small restaurant near Quantico which isn't very posh. Will orders a simple garden salad, his insides feeling queasy. "If you don't mind."

"I... I don't have much of a choice, do I?" says Will. He picks at the tomatoes. "Nowhere to go. No one to go to. Unless I go back to the house, and dad isn't there anymore. What does it matter whether I mind or not?"

"Because you matter, Will. If you do mind, I am certain I can help you locate an apartment or-"

"I don't want your *charity,* Dr Lecter," Will cuts in, and then blanches like he expects to be struck. He ducks his head and says, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that, it was rude of me. I just- It's just that Dad always says that there's no such thing as a free meal. He doesn't like if we don't have to work for something." The young man pauses. Then his mouth twitches into a humorless smile. "Didn't like. Didn't. Past tense."

The older man pokes at his lentil and ricotta cannelloni. "If I ask you to work for me in return for bed and board, will that be more amenable?"

Will's gaze darts up, hopeful and afraid. He knows that Dr Lecter doesn't really need his help, other than with the yard, but there is only so much a yard can be trimmed. What if the doctor has other plans? It is a while before he asks timidly, "What will you have me do, sir?"

"Please, Will, you don't have to call me 'sir'. Hannibal will do, or if you prefer, stick with Dr Lecter." The psychiatrist tries the ricotta and there is a hint of distaste, though not an outright grimace. "I spend much of my day at the office, so my house is usually maintained by the cleaning services that comes in once a week. If you truly wish to earn your keep, you can take over with the basic household chores, such as dusting, vacuuming and perhaps running some errands for me, like grocery shopping or collecting my dry-cleaning." Dr Lecter then smiles. "I will not need you to prepare my meals, however."

"Not if you want me to cook as good as you do," Will says. This is better than anything Will can hope for. He straightens in his seat, his eyes bright. "Do you really mean that? I can work for you?"

"Of course. I would rather you remain a guest, but since that is not appealing to you, we will find another way. You will continue with the yard work, I suppose, but I must ask that you drop your other clients if you insist on doing this." Dr Lecter does not eat his cannelloni; he grimaces at it, as though it has personally offended the man. Will has to hide his amusement. Dr Lecter than glances at Will. "Depending on other people for help is not a weakness, Will."

*****

"Are you psychoanalyzing me, doctor?" Will's storm-blue eyes snap up to meet Hannibal's own and then skates to the side to look at his water glass. "You are, aren't you?"

Hannibal pauses in his mental critique of the sub-par food laid before him. Will Graham switches moods quickly, he muses with hidden delight, from gray worry to crackling ire in the span of a breath. The change wrought in Will's features and posture is marvelous. "Am I? That is a part of me, I'm afraid. I cannot turn it on or off."

"I don't like being psychoanalyzed," says Will shortly.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I know I'm broken, okay?" Will retorts in a quiet snarl. His lovely blue eyes flash up at him again, and skitters aside to stare out the window at the traffic. His fingers, never still for long, starts shredding his paper napkin. "I know I'm not normal."

Hannibal sets aside his cutlery. He's happy to go hungry than eat the swill presented to him, and here is a far more fascinating meal in the form of Will Graham. "Who told you that?"

"The shrink they made me go to when I was in fifth grade." Will is unaware of his wanton destruction of his napkin. Wordlessly, Hannibal slides his own over for Will to tear up when he is done with his own. "Saw him three times. Insulted him the third time and ran away from the session. And then we moved, thank God. But Dad... Dad never treated me the same after that."

Hannibal wants to probe more about Will's father, but decides to opt for a different path. "Why did they send you to a psychiatrist?"

To Hannibal's utter enchantment, Will grins like a fox and actually looks right into his eyes. "I tried to strangle a classmate." The grin disappears and Will turns away again, though he has exchanged his napkin for Hannibal's own. "I almost succeeded. I'm violent when I, uh, when I'm. When I'm angry, I break things. I don't mean to, but I-I can't always, um, control myself. I think you saw. So, um. Maybe you should reconsider. Having me."

I would love to, Hannibal thinks privately. Aloud he says, "What did your classmate do?"

Will's face becomes closed off and he stares at his hands. "We were living in a mobile home then. In a trailer park. Dad got a job, but we couldn't afford a house yet. So, um, I didn't really make friends, but I did well in class. No distractions like TV or anything, so I just, uh, just studied really hard. I didn't tell anyone about my family. Nothing new there, I still don't talk to my classmates about my dad. They didn't ask anyway, I was the weird kid." He chuckles without humor. "I suppose that's the only thing that won't ever change."

Hannibal waits.

"So, um, this kid, Henry Lawson? He followed me home and saw... he saw dad on a bad night. Next day everyone was calling me trailer trash and all that shit, nothing new there. And then someone got into my stuff in school, my assignments and books and all that, and wrote 'trailer bitch' over everything. I got mad, asked around, found out who it was. And when Henry saw me he said I stank and that I was probably-" Will's voice tightens and he clenches the remains of Hannibal's napkin. "He said my dad probably raped me every night, cause that's what happens in trailers. I could shrug off the insults and erase whatever they wrote on my books, but my dad isn't a bad man, he's a good person."

"It appears Mr Lawson had it coming then," says Hannibal.

Will looks at him, as though weighing the sincerity of the words. Then a small smile curves Will's lips, as though they are sharing a secret.

"Yeah. You're probably the only one thinks so besides me." He clears his throat. "So they got me to a shrink. He said I had some form of autism or Asperger's syndrome, makes it hard for me to function in social settings and understand nonverbal communication. I called him out on his bullshit after I did my research. He didn't take too well to that."

Hannibal can imagine it: eleven-year-old Will Graham going to a library and asking for books on autism and Asperger syndrome, analyzing what they said and checking his own understanding, making notes in extremely small handwriting in a cheap notebook, just to call his psychiatrist out on misdiagnosing Will. He wishes he can ask Will what he said, but he shouldn't be digging for dirt on a colleague in the field.

"I suspect," says Hannibal quietly, "you feel more deeply than most people, and that, Will Graham, is not a bad thing."

He tells Will to wait by the car while he speaks to the manager. Mrs Cheng is genuinely apologetic when Hannibal critiques the food, and explains that their usual chef has had to fly to San Diego for a wedding. She promises to tell the stand-in chef his comments, and waives their bill.

Before Hannibal can drive off, the man barrels out of the kitchen, armed with a glower. The manager hurries out and tries to pull him away, but he shoves her aside. Will hurries over to help the petite woman to her feet.

"You the stuck up fucker that told Louise that I can't cook?" the chef says with a sneer. He pokes Hannibal in the chest with a greasy finger and leaves a stain. "If you're so good, then maybe you oughta cook me a meal!"

"What is your name?" Hannibal asks, not backing away.

"Jerry Arness, your *lordship*," the chef spits. Some of the other passers-by are staring and the manager is urging Jerry to return to the kitchen, they're making a scene. The man shrugs her off and glares at Hannibal. "Don't eat here again if you're that fucking picky."

Mrs Cheng keeps apologizing until Hannibal waves her tedious repetitive 'sorry' away.

Will pulls restlessly at his sleeves. "What just happened?"

"We have just met the common American boor," Hannibal says dryly. He frowns at the stain on his jacket. "Some men need to learn manners."

"I thought he was gonna hit you," says Will as they drive off. "But I've seen you fight. So... yeah."

Hannibal considers his options. "Are you afraid of me because of what you've seen?"

"Hmm? No, not really." Will sinks into the seat and plays with his fingers. "I figure, if I do get violent again, you'll be able to stop me. Which is good." He chews on a nail and stops when he sees Hannibal's disapproval. "Um, where are we going?"

"We are picking up some of your belongings, Will. I'm sure you have some things you want with you, and Jack says we just have to avoid the kitchen and the backyard for now, they haven't processed those areas yet. There will be a police officer with us later."

"Oh." Will seems to melt into the seat and stares out the window bleakly.

*****

The front door opens to the living room and Hannibal stays there, while the officer escorts Will to his bedroom to retrieve his belongings.

While ramshackle and old, it is kept fairly clean, other than far too many empty cheap whiskey bottles. Hannibal's nostrils flare at the offending scent, but his focus is on a battered upright piano. It is incongruous to what he notices about the place. There is nothing that isn't utilitarian within the house - the collection of feathers and bits are for the lures Hannibal can

see, laid out on a small table, and there are no photos at all on display. A piano would have been a luxury. It is obviously a discard; the damper pedal is gone, and the corners of the instrument have nicks. He doubts it is in tune.

Yet its presence tells of Will's father's efforts. Hannibal's appraisal of the man rises half a notch.

*****

Will stuffs all five of his tee shirts and his three flannel shirts into his backpack. His underwear is unceremoniously shoved inside, and he thinks that he must learn how to do the laundry using Dr Lecter's washing machine. He has only one more pair of jeans other than the one he is wearing, but if he isn't doing more yard work, he can afford to just switch between the two.

"All done, kid?" asks the officer, a nice young man with fair hair. He smiles kindly at Will. "We can't stay long."

"Yeah, I know," says Will. He goes to his bed and pulls out a small photo frame from under his pillow. "I got everything I need."

*****

Dr Lecter thanks the officer, who drives off first. Will deposits his backpack in the back seat, and hesitates.

"Dr Lecter?"

"Yes?"

"Can you please... I'd like to see where my dad died." Will bites his lower lip. This is more than asking for help, this is asking the man to possibly break the law. But Will has to see for himself. Whatever is left, he needs to see, just so he knows for sure that his father is gone.

The older man regards Will for a long moment. Will can't meet his eyes.

"Never mind," Will mutters, and opens the car door.

"If you're really sure."

Will's heart lurched. He glances up and realizes that the doctor is worried for him. But Will needs to *know*. He nods.

Dr Lecter inclines his head. "Just don't tell anyone else, all right?" he says. "Dr Bloom and Mr Crawford will be very unhappy if they know."

He leads the way and Will follows in his footsteps as best as he can.

*****

Hannibal isn't certain if this is for the best, but if anyone has the right then Will does. The young man treads very carefully, and when they come to the back of the house, Hannibal lets Will come up and stand next to him.

"Don't go any nearer, Will," Hannibal warns.

Will nods.

There isn't much left to see. The body has been removed, of course. The propeller blades are still stained with the brown-black of dried blood; there is a bloody hand print on wall by the back door, where Hobbs had let himself in. The earth has soaked up what flowed out of Will's father, but the stench of death loiters like an unwelcome guest.

*****

Will hasn't thought about what he will see, but he can picture how it happened when he stops next to Dr Lecter.

Lights are on. Someone is inside. Is it the boy?

Knocks on the back door. A tired-looking man with a thick scruff opens the door. Must be the dad.

Drags him out and slams him against a rusty propeller before he can yell. The force pushes the prop blade into his back, winding him.

Slices across his neck before he can cry out. Habit now: grabs him by the hair and guts him. Won't last more than two minutes, if that.

Perhaps the boy is inside. Goes to the back door; braces against the wall to pull it open properly. Knows he left a hand print. Doesn't matter. Purpose is to kill the threat.

Boy is not home.

Turns out the lights.

Waits.

Will's knees almost buckle. His hand flies to the side and grips Dr Lecter's arm to steady himself. He intended to see his father's dying place, and instead sees how his dad was killed. He scrubs at his jeans; he can feel blood caked on his hands. It is some time before he is himself again.

"At least he didn't suffer long," Will says under his breath, and he lets his tears fall. He tells himself that he won't cry for his dad again.

He almost believes it.

*****

Hannibal steadies Will when he loses his balance, but otherwise says nothing. Tears are rolling down Will's hollowed cheeks. Hannibal wishes he could wipe them away and taste the salt of Will's sorrow.

It's not the heart-wrenching grief of last night nor the furious, helpless rage in the afternoon, but a quiet acceptance of reality. Somehow, witnessing this third time makes Hannibal truly feel sorry for Will's loss. However bad his father may have been at parenting, losing him is no less devastating. Hannibal resolutely does not think of that winter， so long ago. He places a comforting hand on Will's back, and waits until the young man turns to go back to the car.

When they are inside, Will asks, "Are they going to put me in a foster home?"

"I do not know," says Hannibal, but the idea is unpalatable. "Do you want to be fostered?"

"No!" Will clutches his knees. "No, I don't. I'll run away if they do."

"Then I will do what I can to make sure you won't be."

The young man drifts into his own thoughts, his face unhappy and pale. Hannibal doesn't intrude but he does put on Bach's Cello Suite No. 2; the low strains wrap about them like a silk cocoon.

They are only twenty minutes from Hannibal's home when Will says, "Will that man survive?"

Hannibal mulls over his answer. "I don't know. I did not pull my punches. Do you want him to live?"

"I want him to die," says Will in a quiet, hard voice. "But not in his sleep. He doesn't deserve that."

"I can offer a platitude about forgiveness right now," says Hannibal, "but I shan't insult your maturity. I do wonder why you want him to suffer."

"He gutted my dad," Will says. "He slashed my dad's throat and gutted him. I want him to know how it feels, to bleed out."

Hannibal pulls over suddenly, killing the engine. The abrupt silence is velvet and suffocating. His knuckles are white for just a second on the wheel before Hannibal relaxes his hands and settled them in his lap.

Will is visibly unsettled. He chews on a thumbnail and can't look anywhere near Hannibal. "I... I'm sorry, I didn't mean it. I just..."

"To want revenge is natural and human, Will," says Hannibal carefully. "However, in taking revenge, you are but even with your enemy; but in passing it over, you become superior to him."

"I know it's wrong. I-I don't... I just..." Will grinds his teeth.

"Will."

The young man looks at Hannibal's hands, and then up to focus on the left of Hannibal's face. "Sorry."

"That desire will mire you in the past. You have a future, and I would prefer if you focus on that," Hannibal says, reaching out to take Will's clenched hand and squeezed, just once, before releasing it. "Also, how did you know the manner of your father's passing?"

"It was obvious," says Will. "The blood on the prop blades, the hand print on the wall, the smell. That guy would have wanted dad out of the way, so he'll be fast, and he'll want dad silent. Throat first then. Then, because he's a hunter, he... he guts dad. Get him to bleed out. He probably turned off the lights to have the element of surprise."

Hannibal studies Will. Either the teenager has been to a few murder sites, or he has a natural aptitude for crime scene analysis. "You'd make a good investigator someday, Will."

Will smiles briefly. "Kind of fucked up for my first scene be the site of my dad's murder."

The doctor shakes his head. "Will? I would definitely prefer for you not to use such language again, especially since we will be living in the same house."

"Sorry," says Will, and stares at his knees all the way to Dr Lecter's house. Hopefully, he won't be leaving it any time soon.

Chapter End Notes

I know little to nothing about the American legal and judicial system, but since it doesn't play that big a role I shan't bog myself down with research.

In taking revenge, a man is but even with his enemy; but in passing it over, he is superior. - Francis Bacon

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

While Hannibal wants to take Will out shopping almost immediately, he also recognizes that the young man needs some time to regroup. Hence, after they have gone to Will's house to collect his belongings, Hannibal drives home. After Will's vindictive little outburst, he has not spoken at all.

"Why don't you put your things down, and I'll show you around the rest of the house?" say Hannibal when they are at the front door.

Will hesitates, and toes off his boots before he steps in.

Hannibal smiles and shakes his head. "You can wear them inside, Will."

"I don't want to scar your flooring," Will mumbles. His arms are wrapped about his middle. "I did enough damage on Thursday."

"In that case, we will have to see to getting you more shoes and thicker socks," Hannibal remarks. "And a proper coat now that summer is fading. I doubt the police will return that jacket laundered, and you may not wish to wear it again."

Will blushes. "Y-you don't have to. I've saved up some money, I can afford a jacket."

"I know you can." Hannibal leads the way upstairs and waits for Will to drop his backpack in the guest suite, which will be the young man's bedroom from now on. "I'd rather you use your savings to get a new bag, and perhaps you would like new notebooks. Being drenched as you were on Thursday must have caused quite a lot of damage to them." Hannibal doesn't remark on how red Will's face and neck have become, but he does wish he could run his thumb over Will's ears, tinted a delicate and exquisite pink at the tips.

Will swallows and says, "Thanks. For... for everything."

Skilled at reading people, Hannibal knows Will is grateful to him for allowing a modicum of independence and self-sufficiency. He wonders how much to offer that he can continue to provide for Will without risking his pride. This is something to discuss with Alana, perhaps, or maybe he can raise the issue with Bedelia. He shows Will where his own bedroom is, suppressing the desire to pull the young man inside and never let him out, and the other guestroom that sits between theirs.

Downstairs, Will already knows the kitchen and the dining room, so Hannibal shows him the pantry, as well as the sitting room with the harpsichord. Hannibal risks a glance at Will, but Will's thoughts are elsewhere. Then the doctor opens the door to the study and is exceedingly pleased by Will's soft intake of breath.

It is far more spacious than his sitting room, with its deep cedar green walls. Will certainly appreciates what has been laid bare before him. His gaze traveled over two walls' worth of books, from floor to ceiling, the shelves of a rich walnut tone; a chaise longue in stunning emerald by the window, with a gray-and-white plaid throw tossed artfully over it; a leather armchair by the fireplace; an antique pedestal desk in mahogany placed at a diagonal to the two walls of books. There was a rug of deep gray and white set before the fireplace, while bronze light fittings and marble figurines accented the space. Hannibal finds it reminiscent of the forests around his childhood home, in the happy days.

"It almost looks cozy," Will comments shyly. "This is your work space, I suppose."

"Not really. I try not to bring work home, but occasionally I have to review certain things for the FBI or do some research," says Hannibal. "Most evenings I retire here after dinner to read or, on occasion, sketch."

"I can see why." The young man treads forward, taking in the various objets d'art that interrupt the rows of books. "I'm surprised you don't have a computer here. I thought you'd, um, I don't know, have a super high-tech set-up."

"I'm old-fashioned," says Hannibal, amused. So Will has been thinking of him, and now he has to recalibrate his concept of Hannibal Lecter. "I have a laptop secreted in one of the drawers, but I prefer my tablet. Where possible, I prefer pen and paper. It is far more personal."

Will smiles. "I'd never thought about it like that. Everyone's online nowadays. I'm the poor freak who can't afford the internet. If not for the library, I wouldn't even know what to do with a computer."

"While there are certain benefits to the virtual, I much prefer physical reality." Hannibal leans against the door jamb and cocks his head, affecting nonchalance. "You should use my laptop for your schoolwork. I don't want it to go to waste, and I was told a computer shouldn't be left idle for too long."

"I could?" Will's face brightened. "But... you have private data on it, right?"

"I'll transfer them to an external hard drive. Once you are familiar with it, I may ask you to compile notes I made on certain readings." Hannibal is warmed by the bashful tilt of the dark- curly head. "Go ahead and settle in with a book. I'll start dinner, and while we wait for it to cook, we shall discuss how we will coordinate our schedules."

*****

Will is still rooted to the spot when Dr Lecter leaves. He ought to follow and offer to help with dinner prep, but an entire *library* is set before him and he can't make his feet head out the exit. Instead, he heads to one of the shelves, the one which has a little bronze statue of a man with lines all over it and points labeled in Chinese or Japanese.

Jesus. He reads multiple languages. He doesn't dare to run his fingers along the spine, but notices that, mixed in with medical and psychology reference texts, there are books on

architecture, literature, music and history, along with a few that seem to be fiction titles, in at least three languages. He spies Mark Twain, Goethe, and Voltaire, the latter two names Will recognizes but without context. *I wonder if I can learn to read them too.*

It feels *right* to be in the study. While the dining room is intimidating and the sitting room too open, Will feels at home here. It stings a little that he feels that way, like he's betraying the memory of his father, but there is a sense of being cherished and protected about the study that reminds Will of Dave Graham. Like his dad is just sitting somewhere at the edge of his vision, patiently tying flies, and there is no bottle within reach.

Will gulps and breathes in deeply. He lets himself exhale only when his lungs threaten to burst. Then he pulls out a fairly worn copy of Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities,* and sits down to read.

*****

Hannibal keeps his menu simple, out of deference to Will. Since they are home earlier than he expected, he decides to serve lamb braised in beaujolais. It will take about four hours to braise properly. He finds the process of cutting vegetables and rubbing seasoning into the lamb meditative; it is entirely physical, and the mind observes with detached enjoyment. He contemplates again the contrast between him wielding the chef's knife and him using the scalpel. The culinary arts is detached and developed from butchery, but Hannibal finds elegance in both. A well-cooked meal brings satisfaction to the body; a properly-slaughtered animal sates the inner beast.

As he sets the lamb into the oven for a first time, he allows himself to think about the Hobbs case. It is obvious that Hobbs has something to do with the missing girls. The key, Hannibal thinks, is Abigail Hobbs. She is privy to the secret acts of her father. He will not have kept secrets from her, not when these secrets are means to collar her to him forever. Hobbs has made Abigail into his ideal, his love is fixed in her like a barbed arrow. What would a man like Hobbs do to keep his daughter with him, subject to him?

He then considers what he would do in Hobbs shoes, if it comes to Will. His lips curve slightly, and then he sighs, a soft, dejected sound that nevertheless fills the space within him.

Such thoughts are dangerous when they give false hope.

*****

Will is already into the middle of the book when Dr Lecter returns. He is still wearing his apron and Will's glance darts aside. The older man looks to be completely in his element.

"The lamb needs an hour and a half," says Dr Lecter, pulling out a notepad from a drawer. "So we might well put this time to good use. How is the book?"

"It's interesting," says Will quietly.

Dr Lecter nods as he writes. "Dickens has a knack of blending the dull horror of life with the charm and delight of the fantastic, but *a Tale of Two Cities* is one of his most somber. I read

that when I wish to think of something other than what is plaguing me."

Will chews on his lower lip. "I guess I can see why." He stands up and hesitates over where to place the book.

"Keep it with you for now," says Dr Lecter with his small, almost imperceptible smile that is always kind. "I only ask that you do not dog-ear the pages or write on them."

"I'm not a barbarian," Will mutters, and then stands by the desk.

The psychiatrist has wonderful penmanship. Will has thought that most doctors scribble.

"I tend to keep a fairly rigid schedule," says Dr Lecter.

"I'll say. You wake at four in the morning too?" Will remarks almost carelessly, his blue eyes scanning the page.

Wake at four, workout for an hour. Prepare breakfast at five after workout. Breakfast at six latest. Prep for lunch and dinner until seven. News until seven-thirty. Appointments from nine until six. Dinner at eight-thirty. Bed at eleven.

Sunday: Groceries. Tuesday: Dry-cleaning. Wednesday: Cleaning services. Thursday: Yard maintenance. Friday: Household laundry.

Once a month: Polish furniture and harpsichord.

Once a month: disinfect kitchen thoroughly.

Will blinks rapidly at the list in his hand. "Holy-" Will stops himself from cussing and flushes. "Um. Wow. You really do need an assistant."

"I enjoy taking care of what is mine, Will," says Dr Lecter. His accent caresses the words, adds more meaning to them. "Which of these tasks do you wish to take over?"

"Well, I, um, I'm sure the kitchen bits are best left to you." Will nibbles on his upper lip, worrying at a dry flakey part of it. "Definitely the yard, I've been doing that since the end of the summer break, and the leaves are gonna start falling any day soon. I can pick up dry-cleaning and, um, the household laundry? I guess you mean the bedsheets and pillowcases and stuff."

"Yes, and casual wear." Off Will's dubious look, Dr Lecter's smile deepens. It makes him look younger, Will thinks privately. The doctor huffs, "I do have casual attire, Will. Though I must admit I do not often find reasons to put them on."

Will grins, just for a heartbeat. "I suppose seeing patients in jeans and a tee-shirt would be very unprofessional."

"Precisely. As for the cleaning services, are you amenable to light dusting and vacuuming? I have the necessary equipment, I just prefer not to dust personally." Dr Lecter taps his nose. "I

have the gift and curse of an exceptionally sharp sense of smell. Dust is terrible for my sinuses."

"Yeah, okay," says Will. He shuffles his feet, wondering just how bad he smells right now to the doctor. "So, um, light housework, picking up dry cleaning, laundry, yard work. I can do that."

Dr Lecter looks pleased. "That is good. I shall return to the lamb, and will interrupt your reading only when it is ready."

*****

Hannibal wishes he didn't mention his sense of smell. For a few seconds, Will appeared mortified. As though his scent is offensive at all, Hannibal thinks mournfully. When Will stood beside him earlier, Hannibal had to keep himself seated. He yearns to have the chance to breathe Will in: the slight muskiness, tinged with earthy richness, overlaid with the smell of leaves both green and brown.

He feels like he has trapped himself into the Garden of Eden. So close the fruit, yet so damning the consequences. Hannibal has no doubt about his self-control, but to play Tantalus daily will test his limits. He will have to put distance between them, not so much that Will thinks that Hannibal dislikes him, but not so close as to tempt himself with Will. The smart thing would be for the young man to live elsewhere, of course, and Hannibal is an intelligent man.

Yet the idea of Will living in some hostel while the state sorted out what to do with him is repugnant and off-putting in the extreme. He mulls over the reason why Will Graham has become a necessity rather than a want, and recalls the cunning grin Will flashed at him when talking about strangling his classmate, and the passion behind his words when talking about gutting Hobbs.

Hannibal pours himself a glass of wine and thinks ferociously to the God he does not hide from, *This one is mine. You will not take him from me.*

*****

The first week is torturous and dreamlike.

On Sunday, he purchases new stationery and a sturdy backpack, and he insists on paying for his socks and more underwear. He is somehow terrified that the doctor will look down on him for his graying, old and frayed boxers, even though he knows that Dr Lecter is not snobbish at all when it comes to Will, and certainly not for the state of his underwear.

Dr Lecter then takes Will to various shops that Will has never dared to enter before. If the doctor has not pushed him, Will would have ducked out and headed straight to Walmart. Instead, he has to select tee shirts that he likes, hoodies, flannel shirts, jeans and pants. Dr Lecter has a way of asking Will to get more that made the teen want to please him, and so when they return home, Will is stunned to find that he has more than a dozen tee shirts, a similar number of flannel shirts and hoodies, four new pairs of jeans and two pairs of cargo

pants. The cherry on top is a gray-brown single-breasted trench coat that makes Will look more mature than he is. Dr Lecter said in the store that it will be perfect for late fall and early winter, and added that he will have Will get a thicker wool coat before winter sets in.

Dr Lecter also brings Will to try on shoes. Will has to swallow back the thanks when the doctor buys him trainers and an extra pair of thick-soled full-grain leather shoes. He had no idea how the doctor could guess he liked running.

*****

The whispers and stares at school on Monday are nearly enough to drive Will running back to Dr Lecter's. Instead he keeps his head down and focuses on making notes in his tiny, spiky writing. He tries to ignore the shakes in his hand and practically flees once he is done with the day.

Dr Lecter makes chicken soup. He says it is a Chinese recipe. Will likes the mildly herbal taste of it, but not the chicken claw. Dr Lecter takes it instead.

*****

On Tuesday he hears the first mutterings about 'sugar daddy' and about how he is probably pleased that his father was killed. Will can't eat the lunch that Dr Lecter packed for him, but devours it when he gets home. Then he throws it all up later when he remembers the accusatory way his teachers looked at his new shoes and gray hoodie, as though Will is unworthy of these things. Will can't decide if they are right.

He picks up the dry cleaning, and is mildly curious how many colors of plaid the doctor has in his wardrobe.

*****

On Wednesday, someone slipped a note into his locker that asked if Will orchestrated his father's murder. Will had brought it home and then ripped it to shreds to be thrown out with the rubbish in the trash cans. He ignores the burning sourness in his chest, and tries to memorize calculus formulae while curled into the corner of the study.

Dr Lecter makes something called gnocchi. Will has second helpings, and falls asleep in the study afterwards, his textbook and notebook still in his lap. He wakes up in his bedroom under the sheets, still dressed, except his shoes have been removed.

*****

On Thursday, some of Abigail's friends glare darkly at him when he walks past, and he can sense the blame. The whispers of 'sugar daddy' are more common, and someone snidely asks how much he's charging. Will wonders how much trouble he'll get into if he accidentally pushes the boy down the stairs.

He thinks about his umbrella, still tucked into his locker, and leaves it there. He'd rather be boiled alive than to look at it ever again.

*****

On Friday, Will skipped two classes because he needed to lock himself in the toilet, frantically trying to keep himself from smashing the mirror and using the silvered glass to stop himself from *feeling*. When he returns, he writes a note of apology to Dr Lecter for skipping dinner, and shuts himself in his bedroom - *his*, his room, not a guest suite now - and reads and reads until his eyes are burning. He does not shed tears. He's done with it. But his entire body trembles when he closes his eyes for too long. He can smell the blood and sweat clinging to Abigail's father. He can see the knife. He can taste the blood in his mouth when he bit down.

When he crawls out around midnight, he sees the note in front of Will's door, telling him about the cold cuts that he can use for a sandwich. Will eats, and tries to ignore the roiling guilt in his gut.

*****

Will doesn't understand why he feels the way he feels.

He has a wardrobe that is practically full, he has three proper meals, he gets to read as much as he wants. He should be grateful, and he is, and he is also deeply, deeply ashamed of his gratitude.

All these things came about because his dad died. Were Dave Graham alive, Will would still be in that little house with insufficient hot water and the infrequent bad days. He would still be hungry every night, and would wake to his father's tired and resigned gaze across their small kitchen.

It seems wrong to be contented, yet Will can't shake the contentment that wraps around him every evening when he goes to the study to read, curled in a corner behind the mahogany desk. He can't shake the comfort of shoes that don't jar his feet when he runs with Dr Lecter in the mornings before the sun comes up. He can't shake the warmth of a filling meal and a hot shower that allows him to scrub himself down completely.

He feels like a traitor.

He knows that the longer he stays, the more he will feel the Judas, but he has done nothing wrong. Knowing he has done nothing wrong is keeping Will on this side of sane. He's not sure whether he can continue for the rest of the term.

*****

Hannibal knows that adaptation is not easy, but he has not foreseen the level of stress that Will is suffering. Not from him, but from the careless cruelty of his peers. *Because* of Hannibal. While Hannibal would love nothing more than to flay the skin off of every student who made Will guilty about having good things, he is also aware that he cannot possibly kill an entire school.

Instead, he humbles himself and asks Alana for lunch on Saturday.

*****

When Alana visits on Saturday, Hannibal and Will have just finished putting away the clean bed linen. Hannibal sends Will to start the coffeemaker and invites Alana to the sitting room. She smells like lily and lavender, and Hannibal smiles with honest pleasure that she has come.

"Thank you," says Hannibal. He laces his fingers together and sighs. "I fear it will be difficult to draw him out of his shell."

"Have you managed to do so?" Alana asks.

Hannibal's mouth twitches minutely. "A little. But I am too close, in that we are sharing a living space. I do not want him to feel stifled by my presence. Yet he does not trust shrinks."

Alana made a face. "Bad experience?"

"You could say that," says Hannibal, not wanting to share Will's anecdote of humiliating the unnamed colleague. "Go easy with him."

"I will."

Will emerges with the two cups of coffee in a tray, along with milk and sugar. "Hello Dr Bloom."

"Hello Will," says Alana. "Thank you. How have you been?"

"Good," says the young man, though his gaze shifts from her hands to the couch to Hannibal's red pullover. "Dr Lecter's been very patient and generous."

Alana nods in agreement. "He is. He used to be my mentor in John Hopkins."

Will looks from Hannibal to Alana, never staying long on their faces. His cheeks pinked faintly. "It must be nice."

"The PhD. candidates thought we were having an affair," Hannibal says quickly, though for what reason he cannot fathom. "which told me volumes of their ability to read people."

Alana laughs, a cheerful, tinkling sound. "You were having an affair, just not with me."

Will's cheeks darken further. "Um, I guess I'll go to the study while you guys, uh, while you chat."

"Actually," says Alana, "I'm here to talk to you."

Hannibal almost frowns. What happened to going easy?

"Mr Crawford - you remember him? - says you may want to claim your father's body," she says gently. She stands and takes his hands when she sees them shaking. Hannibal has never wanted to throttle her until this moment. She continues, "Do you want to?"

"I... I don't know what to do with it," Will stammers. "Um. What do people do?"

"Bury them, generally," says Hannibal. He doesn't think he sounds different. "Or perhaps you would rather cremate him."

Will looks at his hands, being held by Alana's smaller, more delicate ones. He pulls away and wraps his arms around his middle. "I think, erm, I think cremation. Better option. Dad wouldn't have wanted me to... to put him somewhere I'd have to keep visiting."

Alana nods and returns to her seat. "I will tell Mr Crawford that then." She takes out her phone and remarks, exceedingly nonchalantly, "I like your tee-shirt. Is it new?"

Will's eyes darted to her face and then away. He pulls at the hem. "Yeah."

"I like it."

"Me too. That's why I got it." He inhales and exhales, shakily. "I have a ton of homework. Good day, Dr Bloom. Dr Lecter, I'll be in the study. May I use your laptop?"

Hannibal nods. Once Will has shut the door behind himself, Hannibal regards Alana. "That was not going easy."

"He's got a sharp mind," says Alana thoughtfully. "Perhaps instead of going easy, I need to be direct and honest." She then frowns and looks at Hannibal. "Is this going to be a formal doctor-patient relationship?"

Hannibal shakes his head. "Not unless he wants it to be. I'm not his legal guardian nor his father; I can't force this. Not that I wish to force my decision on another." He sighs and pushes his hair from his face. "Will is far too aptly named, I'm afraid. But he needs someone to listen, and if he won't confide in me, perhaps he will talk to you."

"Does he have friends of his age?"

"For that, I think you will need to converse with him. I shall prepare lunch." He meets her curious gaze and inclines his head. "Thank you for trying."

*****

Will isn't entirely surprised by the knock on the door. Dr Bloom enters in a soft wash of floral sweetness, quiet and serene. She takes a seat on the chaise longue and watches Will tap away determinedly at Dr Lecter's laptop.

"Hannibal asked me to come," she says.

Will keeps his eyes on the text he's reading for social studies next week. "I guessed. I suppose he is worried."

"Are you happy here?" Dr Bloom asks.

While he wants to snap at her, she is genuinely concerned and Dr Lecter's friend. Will bites his tongue and says instead, "Dr Lecter is very good to me. And he keeps me busy."

Dr Bloom watches Will; he can sense her assessing gaze on him. He darts a glance at her and then looks away, feeling irritation claw up his insides. "I don't want therapy."

"This isn't therapy. Hannibal is concerned, and he thinks you might want to share with me what you won't tell him." Dr Bloom smiles. "Are you afraid of hurting his feelings if you told him?"

Will's fingers still. After a pause just this side of too long, he resumes scrolling down the page. It is almost a minute before he says, "I don't want him to hear the stupid things my schoolmates say. It's not worth it."

"But you hear them."

"Can't help it, I go to school with them." He stares at the screen and tries to keep his voice calm. "He's been nothing but kind to me, and he's being slandered for it. And no one seems to care that-" He chews on the inside of his cheek. "My dad was murdered, and they seem to think I ought to suffer more visibly."

Dr Bloom waits. The silence is welcoming and open. Will inhales and breathes out, aware that she is not a friend, and thankful that she isn't. Having someone to talk to who isn't a friend is... easier.

"Where were they when I was suffering?" he says in a low, harsh voice. "No one has said a word of condolence to me. No one *gives a fuck*. My dad was killed and all they think about is that I'm wearing nicer clothes. They just want to whisper and whisper and whisper, to spread those stupid lies and make assumptions."

"It hurts that they talk about you."

"It hurts because they talk about him," says Will. He clears his throat. "Dr Lecter doesn't deserve scorn for helping me."

Dr Bloom's face is soft. "Will, you don't deserve scorn either."

"I'm used to it," says Will.

"You still don't deserve it." She stands and comes to the table. Will tries not to flinch when her hand touches his shoulder. Soft, like everything else about her, but grounding. She sighs and says, "Thank you for sharing with me, Will. Do you want me to tell Dr Lecter about this?"

"No." The answer is swift and vehement. Will clenches his fists. "No. He doesn't have to know. I can deal. I just need, I just... I just need time."

*****

Lunch is a tense affair. Will has the expression of a closed-in creature, as though he may start snarling if anyone approaches. Alana looks thoughtful and concerned, which in turn concerns Hannibal. Once they are done eating, Will flees again to the study.

The doctor collects the dishes to wash, but he is soon joined by Alana. She offers to dry and he indicates the towel on the counter for that purpose.

"He doesn't want me to tell you the details," she says, "but I think you can guess what it is that bothers him."

Hannibal exhales heavily. "Children can be cruel."

"Teenagers especially so," says Alana sadly. Then she says, "Abigail Hobbs' condition is stable. The doctors are certain she will wake."

"And her father?"

"High chances as well. Jack is looking forward to that, though he's been driving Bev and the techs crazy with his demands that they go over the sites with everything they've got."

Hannibal dries his hands and waits for Alana to finish up. "So there is nothing I can do?"

"Give him time to adjust, and give him assurances that you have no ulterior motive. You don't, do you?" Alana teases, though there is a warning in her query. "I can't even imagine the media circus once Hobbs is formally charged. Will may need to absent himself from school." She kneads her brows. "Jack's been keeping Freddie Lounds at bay, but I thought I'd warn you just the same. She's sniffing around for a chance to get to Will alone."

Hannibal makes a moue of distaste. "She reminds me of vermin."

"And that's as rude as you get, Hannibal," Alana says with a warm chuckle. "All right. I have to drop by Port Haven for a consult. Enjoy your weekend, Hannibal."

"Will I see you at the opening later?" Hannibal is looking forward to the exhibit on figure drawings.

"I doubt it, I'm going out with Beverly to the movies. Girls' night out." Alana smiles and kisses his cheek. "Enjoy yourself."

*****

When he finishes the reading, Will feels the same irritation earlier scratching under his skin. He rubs over his arms, willing the need to pull at the itch to go away.

Dr Lecter chooses that moment to appear, dressed in a suit. On a Saturday. To be fair he isn't wearing a tie, and the colors are more muted. "Will, I have to go into town to purchase strings for my harpsichord. Would you like to come with me or would you prefer to stay?"

Will wants to choose the latter, but given how he feels right now he knows it's not a good option. The knives in the kitchen are singing to him. He needs to get away and not listen. "I'll

come with." Then he pauses. "Will you be going to Mr Budge's?"

"I have not made his acquaintance."

"Oh," says Will. "Um, maybe you'd like to meet him. He supplies the strings for the orchestra. And, uh, I want to check with him about something."

Dr Lecter smiles. "All right then."

*****

Tobias Budge is not what Hannibal expected. He is slim, dark, and very similar to Hannibal.

"Hello," he says to Hannibal, his teeth very even and his smile a touch too fixed. "I've heard about you, Dr Lecter. A pleasure to meet you at last."

The glittering gaze tells Hannibal that Budge has recognized a fellow connoisseur. Hannibal allows a mild smile. "I doubt Will has spoken of me. He speaks little of what is important to him."

"No, not from Will. From one of your patients. Franklyn." Budge tilts his head. "He admires you."

And I loathe him, Hannibal thinks although he does not show that at all. "I suppose he does tend to wax rhapsodic. I wonder if you have string for harpsichord?"

"Certainly." The man goes into the other room where Will is thumbing through sheet music.

Hannibal watches Will reading music and thinks about the piano in the young man's old home, battered and out of tune. Will's hands are callused from toil but how beautiful they would be, fingers dancing over ivory keys. Will mentioned before that he smashes things when he's angry - he has a fire buried at his core. A harpsichord will not match his temperament. But a piano, with its many hammers that urge the strings to sing...

Budge rematerializes too soon. Hannibal thanks him, and they hold their gaze for a second, weighing each other up. Then Budge retreats; Hannibal, after all, has had more practice, and has utter control over his other self.

"Mr Budge," says Will, unaware of the challenge that Hannibal just won, "have you... um, am I down for anything over the holidays?"

"Surely you will want to spend time with your father," says Budge, heading to Will. His eyes flick over to Hannibal but he does not quite have the same skill at hiding his thoughts.

Hannibal knows that Budge knows, and he knows what Budge wants Will to feel. He slips Budge's name card into his pocket.

Will closes the score he is looking at. "My father passed away recently, Mr Budge."

"My condolences," says the man, and Hannibal feels a flare of disgust at how *sincere* he sounds. "In fact, I do have one: Mrs Komeda is hosting a Christmas benefit for young musicians and has requested for some of my students to put up performances. I can put your name down if you want."

"I... yes please." Will licks his lips nervously. "Um, if I could borrow the scores to practice with...?"

Budge gestures to the shelves. "Feel free."

Hannibal moves over and helps select a few traditional Christmas songs, and then pulls Mozart's sonatas from the shelves as well. "Two from each set will go over nicely," he suggests. Then he hands the scores to Budge and smiles, the expression not reaching his eyes. "We'll have these and the harpsichord strings."

Will tugs on Hannibal's sleeve. "You don't have to purchase that," he murmurs, eyes on Hannibal's shirt.

"I want to."

The young man's cheeks pinked and he let go. "Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me, Will." Hannibal touches Will's cheek, a knuckle brushing over the healing scar. "Wait for me at the car, please."

Once Will has exited, Hannibal goes to the counter to pay. He tenses when Budge says, "Will is a fine musician, isn't he?"

Hannibal allows the inner self to rear its head, just a little, as he meets the man's eyes. "He is also a wonderful young man."

"He was such a delight to have in the shop over the summer. And to hear him play... He'll never be a master at it, but he shows his heart so delightfully in his music." Budge smirks when Hannibal's upper lip twitched. "I feel like I know him so well, even if he hardly speaks about what is important to him."

Hannibal keeps the receipt. "I think I shall visit again, Mr Budge. Good afternoon."

*****

When Hannibal steps out of the shop, he is still seething over Tobias Budge's obvious preening, and doesn't notice Freddie Lounds talking to Will immediately. When she sees him, she takes a picture, the flash blinding him for an instant.

"Dr Lecter," she says faux-sweetly. "Such a pleasure to see you here."

"I wish I could say the same," replies Hannibal. "Will, get in the car please."

Will scurries to obey. Freddie looks over and purrs, "He is such an obedient little thing, isn't he?"

"Ms Lounds, you have been very rude. And I... I do not like rude people."

"What is the nature of your relationship with Will Graham? His father's death certainly has no impact on you, you move in different circles." She grins. "He seems fond of you, won't hear a thing against you."

Hannibal wishes he could just snap her frail neck and let her drop silent. Instead he gets into the car and drives off as fast as he can.

Will's hands are clasped. Hannibal glances over, hesitates, and then asks, "What did that woman say?"

"She said you're probably fattening me up for the slaughter," Will replies. Then he stares out the window and nibbles on his lower lip, as though he is trying to keep from smiling. "I told her to, um, to fuck off and walk into traffic."

Hannibal surprises himself by laughing. He likes the reminder that Will has bite. "That is possibly the only person to whom I think rudeness has its place."

"Who is she, anyway?"

"A blogger with delusions of importance. She calls herself a journalist." Hannibal's mouth twitches. "I read her posts because she has a rodent's instinct for filth; she can get into any crime scene somehow. It is frustrating but she is sometimes useful to Jack Crawford."

"I don't like her."

*****

He is very uncomfortable with the way Freddie Lounds looked at him earlier, like she was measuring him for something. And while he could not hear what she said to Dr Lecter, he can assume it was not too far from what his schoolmates have been saying.

"Few people do," says Dr Lecter. "She is fine with not being liked. Unfortunately, my consultations with the FBI put me in her scope of targets. And I suppose she wants your side of the story."

"Since Abigail and her father are still unconscious, I guess I will have to be the source." Will fidgets and then asks, "Is Abigail going to be okay?"

"Do you want to visit her?"

"Can we?" Will is astonished that he rather wants to. He wants to see what happened to her. "Are we allowed to?"

Dr Lecter nods. "Alana said she might wake any day now."

Will grits his teeth and hopes that she doesn't do that while they are there.

*****

The girl looks as though she is swallowed up by all the tubes. Will swallows dryly and only half-listens to Dr Lecter speaking with Dr Hazlinda.

She is so pale. There is a bandage around her neck, like a choker or a tight scarf.

Or a noose.

Will wonders what she was thinking when her father cut her throat, wonders why her father did not cut deep enough to sever her artery entirely. He wonders what Abigail said about him that drove her father to his home, drove her father to murder his father, drove her father into trying to kill Will.

Dr Lecter steps out with Dr Hazlinda, leaving Will alone with Abigail for a moment.

He stares at her face, and remembers how solemn she looked the Thursday before last. He recalls the looped writing on the card stuck to the umbrella tossed into the locker.

Will places a hand at Abigail's throat, and wonders how long and with how much strength he would have to press down before he does some damage, even with the tube stuck into her.

"Will."

*****

Hannibal's heart skipped when he saw Will closing a hand around Abigail's throat. It won't be difficult. She's in a coma. They'll think she died asleep, that the damage was irreparable.

But he can't bear Will succumbing to the darkness now. Not when Hannibal still has so much to give him, show him.

He calls out Will's name, and the young man turns to look at him, eyes dark and full of hate. Hannibal feels a thrill shoot down his spine but he makes no acknowledgment of it. He merely goes to Will and gently pulls him away from the girl asleep in her bed. She has no knowledge that she nearly died again.

"Will," Hannibal murmurs, almost reverent, and then he pulls himself together. "Come away now. You will want to read through your scores. She won't wake yet."

*****

"Yes," says Will. He sees an image of Abigail, eyes wide and horrified, staring at him as his hand closes around her throat while *her father watches, watches as his daughter is taken from him as he took away the daughters of other men and as he took away Will's dad, serves him right-*

"Will?" Dr Lecter's voice jars him out of his thoughts. "What would you like for dinner?"

Will smiles up at the doctor gravely. "I'd like venison, if we can find any."

Dr Lecter returns the smile, his maroon eyes warm and gentle. "Let's go shopping then."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your support! The story is planned out in full, and there are about 16 - 17 chapters (barring sudden inspiration). I won't answer any questions directly but the answers are all in the text. The other killers will appear (not all, but those I find useful) and I promise I will update as fast as I can, just to evict the plot bunny that's bouncing around my brain.

Chapter 4

"I thought you were going to have dinner with me," Will remarks apologetically. "If I'd known you were going out, I wouldn't have put you to any trouble. I could've made a sandwich."

"It's only a stir-fry, Will, hardly any trouble at all." Hannibal is apologetic. "I have promised the curator that I will be there for this opening, Will. Perhaps we can attend the next one together."

Will smiles nervously. "I... I don't think I'd know how to behave at such events, Dr Lecter."

"The more reason for you to start early," Hannibal says. He leaves Will in the kitchen and hurries to get ready.

It should concern him that he enjoys doing things for Will. Clothing and feeding him makes Hannibal feel tender. Somehow, he is comfortable allowing this wounded young man into his fortress, though at the moment Will is still tentative about his boundaries within Hannibal's world. Perhaps Hannibal sees the animal that is inside Will and is responding to it. The fleeting moment in the hospital had been breathtaking; Will had seemed unlike himself and yet utterly, completely *him*. The potential is tantalizing.

Still, Hannibal does not wish to draw the darkness out of the young man yet. It is sufficient to know that the possibility exists. He will coax it out of Will when the young man is older and less likely to succumb to bursts of passion, driven as he is by anger. Perhaps teaching Will anger management will be necessary. Alana has established herself as a potential confidante - Hannibal tries not to be envious about that; better her than some unknown stranger - and she will try to help Will.

The encounter with Budge left a sour taste in the back of Hannibal's throat. He knows of Tobias Budge, of course, since Franklyn has been going on and on about him, "you will love him, Dr Lecter, he's just like you, so educated and refined, we're really getting along splendidly". It is obvious to Hannibal that Franklyn has unwittingly found a lesser version of him, and has showered onto Budge all the unwelcome attentions that Franklyn wants to show Hannibal. While the doctor has no compunctions about leaving Franklyn to Budge, he does not like the way Budge interacts with Will. The fact that Will knows the man is bothersome.

Now that Budge has met Hannibal, what will Budge do?

Hannibal thinks that he should have a proper conversation later. He has no doubts that Franklyn, the sniveling man-shaped bag of neuroses, will turn up; it is no secret that Hannibal and the curator, Ms Emmanuella James, are close acquaintances, and he is nothing but obliging when it comes to social niceties.

It is black-tie, so Hannibal opts for a midnight blue tuxedo with peaked lapels. He knows Emmanuella invited him to be seen. It is likely that most of the guests are familiar faces, and his own architectural drawings are known to have helped him secure his place in Johns

Hopkins. He wishes to return once he has stayed long enough to be polite, but he is likely to be late socializing. Hannibal is not a fool. He knows he wants to come home where Will is, and he knows what that says about him.

*****

Will dries his plate and carefully slots it back into its allotted space. The kitchen is still intimidating to him, and he carefully avoids looking at the knives that Dr Lecter handles with grace and confidence.

His skin prickles. He thinks about Abigail, pale skin almost white under the fluorescent lights, her dark hair fanned out in a halo. He shivers with the recollection of the sheer hate that had splintered through him back in the hospital. The idea of killing her in front of her father came so naturally - Will clenches his fists - and in that few heartbeats as he held that image, he had felt strong. Like he has done something right.

He can't dwell on that.

He is on his way to the study to dig into a translated copy of *Don Quixote,* when Dr Lecter descends the stairs.

Will stares.

"You look amazing," he blurts out, and then covers his mouth. He is mortified. That is not what he means to say at all. "I-I meant, um, I... Okay. Yeah."

Dr Lecter looks charmed by Will's compliment. The corners of his eyes crinkle slightly. "I'd have thought you are used to me in suits."

Will doesn't quite know what to do with his hands. He settles for wrapping his arms about his middle. "Yeah, um, tuxedo. You look like you stepped out of a magazine or, I dunno, like you're a movie star. Uh, I don't mean you- I mean, you always look very good. God, I should shut up now."

He wishes the ground would just swallow him up and he averts his eyes, lets his hair shield his embarrassment from the doctor. Dr Lecter crosses the space between them easily and finger-combs Will's hair from his eyes. The simple gesture startles a thrill that races down Will's spine.

"Thank you, Will. I appreciate the compliment."

Transfixed by the man's low reassurance, Will meets Dr Lecter's gentle gaze, and for a second his heart lurches into his throat. He half-believes that the older man is going to lean in and kiss him, and Will's pulse picks up. He is conscious of a mild disappointment when Dr Lecter steps away to put on a coat and take his keys.

"I may be delayed tonight. Please do go to bed early, Will," says Dr Lecter. His tone is quiet and distant, and he pushes his hands into his pockets, as though apprehensive of what they will do next.

"Yes sir," says Will automatically, and flees into the study.

*****

What was that?

Hannibal is barely paying attention to his driving. The look in Will's eyes when he saw Hannibal - the doctor swallows. He is so used to being in control of his body that to have such a reaction to such a simple, if sincere, compliment is enough to unnerve him.

The silkiness of Will's curls over the backs of his pointer and middle fingers haunts him, and the memory of that involuntary flutter of Will's lashes is sufficient to make Hannibal's pulse skip a beat. He is used to having control over everything in his life, including himself. The last time he was powerless, he lost too much.

Hannibal is not one given to swearing, but he wants to curse aloud. That instant, that infinitesimal instant when Will seemed open and soft and accepting - Hannibal wants to preserve it in amber and bury it in the chambers of his heart.

Cease this obsession, he snarls at himself, aware that it is futile.

He should have known when he started taking an interest in Will Graham nearly a month ago. Yet, in his arrogance, he has ignored the signs. He has walked right into it, open-eyed and blind, wanting to know more about this self-possessed, shy, competent young man who is always punctual, always polite, never presumptuous.

And in the past week, he has learned so much about Will that it will be nearly impossible to scour him from Hannibal's memory palace. He will forever be haunted by this apparition. Reading will recall Will, curled in his corner of the library, asleep with a book in his lap. Cooking will remind of Will's delight at the abundance of food. Music and art are monuments to Will's innate sense of the aesthetic.

He grinds his teeth together. He cannot hope to appreciate what he loves without considering Will Graham's response to these same arts, *and it has only been one week.*

He's a boy. Just a boy. Why should I care?

The rational part of his mind smirks.

Because he is unique, he is innocence and violence, pride and humility, mercury and flame. He is a singularly dichotomous wild creature, being tamed to the hand through Fate's intervention.

You, my friend, Hannibal's rational mind says calmly, *are well and truly* ***fucked.***

Hannibal is not some lovesick fool. He knows full well what he himself is, and harbors no delusions that if Will ever finds out, it will be the end of this idyll.

"Will, what have you done to me?" Hannibal asks the velvet silence of the car, and wishes there is an answer.

*****

What was that?

Will scrubs his face with cold water in the bathroom, trying to focus. The whole world feels surreal. He still isn't certain if he actually said what he said, and whether he imagined the whole bit where Dr Lecter looked in his eyes and that Will wanted the doctor to lean in-

"Oh God," Will gasps. "I must be insane. This is Dr *Lecter*. He probably has hundreds of women throwing themselves at him."

Like the beautiful Dr Bloom, his mind whispers, treacherous and insidious. *You're too young for him.*

Will squeezes his eyes shut. He wishes he knew why the second thought hurts more than the idea of Dr Lecter and Dr Bloom together.

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The exhibit featured figure drawings from a collection of masters around the world. Hannibal enjoys the human form and is genuinely pleased he has come. He is discussing the finer points of Hockney's work with Mr and Mrs Frucht when Hannibal senses an intrusion on the periphery of his range of vision. He keeps his expression pleasant.

"I think that young man wishes to speak with you," says Mr Frucht.

The elderly couple do not retreat, for which Hannibal is glad. He turns and inclines his head.

"Good evening, Dr Lecter," says Franklyn. He reminds Hannibal of an overeager dog, except that he sweats a lot more. "It's good to see you here."

"Good evening, Franklyn." Hannibal looks at the black man beside him. "Hello, Mr Budge."

"You've met Tobias? That's great!" Franklyn ignores the Fruchts. "I was going to introduce you two. Guess I'm saved the trouble."

Hannibal wonders how soon before he can refer Franklyn to another therapist. The man is incredibly rude, and getting on Hannibal's nerves.

Mrs Frucht says, her tone one of icy politeness, "How nice of you! Hannibal, this is-?"

"Franklyn, Franklyn Froideveaux," the man says before Hannibal can speak. "I'm sorry, I just... I hardly see Dr Lecter outside. I'm his patient. And this is Tobias Budge."

Another faux pas. Hannibal is appalled at the man, but hides his contempt. "I keep my work and private lives separate, as any therapist would advise."

"Franklyn, we shouldn't monopolize Dr Lecter's time," says Budge, speaking up for the first time since Franklyn dragged him over.

Franklyn's face falls almost comically, but he bobs his head to Hannibal and the Fruchts before he is towed away.

Mrs Frucht's dark gray eyes flick from Hannibal to Franklyn's departing figure and back again. "I have a renewed respect for your manners and patience, doctor," she murmurs, and sips from her martini. Her husband smiles broadly and pointedly turns back to the art.

Hannibal allows a tiny flicker of amusement. "I do think I should speak with Emmanuella later. She invited me and I have not conveyed my gratitude."

"Do thank her for us," says Mrs Frucht, and offers a brief, wicked smile that hinted at her younger, more reckless days.

Hannibal nods. "I shall be sure to invite you to my next dinner party, should a feast present itself."

"Not too long a wait, I hope," says Mrs Frucht. "David and I are not getting any younger."

"As are none of us," says Hannibal, and turns to more palatable topics, aware at all times of the two gazes fixed on him, one unwelcome, the other predatory.

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To Will's relief, the weekend passed with little incident, and neither he nor Dr Lecter referred to that few seconds before Dr Lecter left for the exhibit opening. The only thing new was that the doctor gave him a cell phone. Will wanted to refuse the gift, but Dr Lecter said he might need to contact Will on the occasions that he is out of state, so Will has to keep it.

It makes him feel strangely gratified that Dr Lecter makes an effort to package his gifts not as presents but as tools to help the doctor. Will thinks he should try not to be too defensive about Dr Lecter providing for him. After all, Will is earning his keep.

*Don't fool yourself, son, he's **letting** you do what he can do himself. It's charity disguised as a salary.* It makes Will sick with longing to hear his father's voice, gruff and empty. He grits his teeth against the reminder.

No it's not. He can do this, but my doing it frees up his time. Other people pay for help with cleaning and with yard work. This is the same.

When Dave Graham was alive, Will never argued with him. Doing so in his head feels a little crazy, but Will knows he's not fully normal, and it seems better to talk it out with the ghost of his dad than to take it out on himself. He is tempted, however, but he knows better than to go down that path a second time.

He has promised his father he'll not cut himself again. He hasn't, not after that time when Dave found Will bleeding in the bathroom, and the silence that had followed while he wrapped up the wounds in their tiny apartment.

"You have five cuts on your left arm," Dave Graham had said, "and six on your right. So, I'll have to have eleven too. Even Steven."

Will had never hated himself more as he watched his father dig in the razor blades. He had begged his dad to stop, but Dave did not, until he had the same number of horizontal slashes across both his forearms, just like Will's own. Will wanted to die then, he was screaming at his father and then begging, and he remembers falling silent because even to breathe was nearly impossible. That was the last time he ever cried in front of his father, and the first time he ever heard his father telling him how proud he was of Will.

*****

"It has been more than a week since you took Will Graham in as your personal assistant and guest," says Dr Du Maurier. "How has it been?"

Hannibal crosses his legs, his hands on his lower abdomen. Neutral and open, mirroring his therapist's posture. In another life he would have pursued her, to see what lies below the thick shell of ice. "He has adapted. I feel this arrangement should satisfy the state - after all, few families will adopt a 17 year-old."

Bedelia smiles coolly. "How do you feel, having to share your living space with another?"

"The house is less... hollow, in its silent moments. I like that fullness." He knows she knows he is only choosing what aspects of himself to reveal. It is a farce, their sessions, and they both are aware of it, yet each plays their part as best as they can. "I harbored doubts initially, as you know. He is a teenager and susceptible to the foibles of the immature. But he has not demonstrated the destructive artlessness of youth. I find myself..." he trails off, the word escaping his tongue.

"Happy?"

Hannibal smiles with his eyes. "Close," he admits. "Close to contentment, I think."

The blonde psychiatrist tilts her head and studies Hannibal's face. "You have been providing for him," she says at last. "How do you feel about that?"

"Nurturing." Hannibal lets the word stay in the air between them.

"Like a father?" Her fingers brush the stem of her glass of wine.

"I am not his father," Hannibal says, rather forcefully. He simmers down and sips at his own drink. "I have no desire to be."

"It can be addictive to provide for others," Bedelia warns lightly. "And easy for those provided for to form attachments to their provider."

Hannibal allows amusement to show from his eyes. "Are you accusing me of encouraging dependency, Dr Du Maurier?"

"Everyone has an intrinsic responsibility for their own lives, Dr Lecter." Her rebuke is hidden in the velvet of her words.

"No man is an island."

"No," the woman agrees, "and yet we are all islands of our making. You have been an island for a very long time, Hannibal, and I admit it is surprising that you are allowing a bridge to form between you and Will Graham."

"He came into my life, and I saw his suffering." He flicks his gaze up to meet her cool assessment. "What kind of doctor am I if I allowed myself to be blind?"

Bedelia cocks her head, her elaborately curled hair a fall of wintry sunbeams. "A common one."

Hannibal changes the subject. He does not want her to dwell on Will Graham, and though she sees through his ploy, she accedes graciously, and they discuss the issue of his patient becoming fixated on him.

*****

Will is washing his hands when two boys from the basketball team come into the bathroom. Will sees the captain and vice-captain in the mirror and his heart sinks. The last thing he wants is trouble; his head is already full.

"Hey look," says Kelly Trent, the captain. "It's the freak."

Will ducks his head and tries to go around them, but the captain blocks his way. Will suppresses a spark of anger.

"Excuse me," Will says. He really does not want to get into this, and lowers his gaze.

Kelly steps closer. He tries to loom over Will, but Will backs away until his lower back hits a sink. "How's things, Graham? Heard your dad was killed by Abigail's dad."

"I'm getting to all right." Will keeps his eyes on the tiles. "Can't undo what's done."

"Yeah?" Slowly, Kelly cages Will in, one long arm on either side of the dark-haired teen. He is taller than Will and Will swallows, keeps his eyes fixed on Kelly's undoubtedly expensive shoes. His breathing is threatening to become shallow. "I also heard you found someone to take care of poor lil' you."

The vice-captain, Jeremy Eng, sniggers. Will's fingers clench on his jeans.

"Did you find him on your knees or on your back?" Kelly continues. "Cos I think the basketball team is probably willing to sponsor you for gloves or something."

Will grits his teeth. "I want to leave now. Please step aside."

"Oh, so polite!" Kelly leers, right in Will's face. "Did your sugar daddy teach you that?"

"Don't call him that," Will snaps.

"He's a doctor, isn't he?" Kelly asks Jeremy. "At least now we know he's a perv and a pedo- OW! Fuck, dude!"

Will has just headbutted Kelly, bloodying his nose. "Shut up. Dr Lecter isn't like that."

"Freak!" Kelly snarls, and slams Will back against the sink. Will bites off a cry when his spine collides with the hard porcelain. "I'll call him what I want, fag! Bet he likes it when you cry, huh? You cry for him?"

"Kel we oughta go-" Jeremy seems nervous now.

"Shut the fuck up, Jeremy, and lock the goddamn door." Kelly drags Will around and presses his face into the mirror. He hisses into Will's ear. "Were you fucking Abigail, huh? That why her freak dad came after you? Bet he saw a fellow psycho. Maybe your precious doc's a psycho too-"

Will struggles and frees an arm. He reaches back, grabs a handful of hair, and yanks with all his might. Kelly yells and rears back. Will's hand comes free with a fistful of sandy brown hair. He stares at the clump and shakes it from his hand, but before he can say a word Kelly is at him again.

Kelly punches Will and sends him sprawling against the mirror again, and then wipes the blood streaming from his nose. "Does he make you call him daddy?" he says with a sneer. "Or do you just cling to him and say it anyway, Graham?"

"Stay the fuck away from me," Will warns. His lower back hurts and his cheek feels tender. "I haven't done anything to you."

"No, but it ain't gonna stay that way," says Kelly. He darts in and starts choking Will.

Jeremy runs over and tries to pry Kelly off. "Kel, come on, we can't do this-"

Will's knee snaps up and hits Kelly in the groin. The taller boy shouts and curls in instinctively. Jeremy rushes to his teammate and pulls him away.

Without hesitation, Will slams his elbow back and smashes the bathroom mirror. "You want a freak? You got one," he says, and pries one of the larger shards out of the shattered glass. His fingers bleed and he wants to smile with how *clean* it feels, to be cut again.

"What the hell?" Jeremy yelps when Will advances. "Get away!"

"Get out," Will hisses. "Kelly's mine."

Kelly is still wheezing as he straightens. Wrong move - Will barrels into his midsection and they crash against the wall before sliding to the floor. Kelly is merely winded from that impact - Will is not very heavy, after all - but he has to shield his face and neck when Will brings the glass shard down. His arms are soon lined with red and he's screaming. Will

ignores the cries. His teeth are bared, and the glass slices into his palm like cleansing fire. It feels good-

"Stop it!"

Some other people have rushed in to drag Will, kicking and snarling, from Kelly Trent. For someone so skinny, Will has to be restrained by three guys. He drops the mirror shard and it skitters across the tiled floor. Kelly winces as it comes near him.

Apparently, Kelly's yelling and Jeremy running out has drawn quite a crowd. A teacher pushes her way inside and, on seeing the blood on the basketball captain, tells someone to get the school nurse.

"What happened?" she asks, and when she looks at Will her eyes widen. "Oh my God."

*****

"Will, please tell me what happened in the bathroom." Mrs De La Costa is persistent, but increasingly frustrated.

Will Graham stares at the floor, his messy hair shielding his eyes. He has not said a word since the three boys were taken to the school nurse. Kelly and Jeremy have already gabbled a whole bit abut Will going mad and attacking them with a mirror shard, but Mrs De La Costa wants to hear from Will.

"Listen. I know it's been hard on you since your dad died-"

"He was murdered. Ripped apart." Dark eyes flash at her, almost feral, and then look away again.

"Will, I want to help. Tell me what happened," she pleaded. When he says nothing, she sighs. "Fine. Then I'll have to call your temporary legal guardian. I have his number on file-"

To her surprise, Will grabs her arm. "Don't. Please don't call him. I don't want Dr Lecter to... I don't want him to come."

"He is your legal guardian, Will, he has to be informed."

"Call my therapist," says Will, and then his face pales. He licks his lower lip. "I... I have her number. Dr Alana Bloom. She can help."

*****

Hannibal sees Alana's car on the driveway and is surprised. She is usually busy lecturing at this time of day. Something must have happened.

When he gets in, he is not happy to see Will and Alana sitting together on the couch. She is murmuring something at the young man, who is doing his best impression of a statue. Hannibal thinks his stone lions have more life in them.

"Alana," he says to get her attention, and notices Will's flinch at his voice. "I thought you have a class right now."

"David's covering for me," she says. She looks at Will and places a hand on his shoulder. "Will, he has to know. Do you want to do it yourself?"

Will shakes his head. "Could you-?"

"Of course," she says. She comes to Hannibal and indicates that they should go to the dining room.

"What happened?" Hannibal asks, leaning against the table. He has not even taken off his jacket yet.

"Will got into a fight at school." She sighs and brushes her tresses from her face. "He smashed a bathroom mirror and tried to stab the basketball captain with a glass shard. He nearly succeeded."

"Oh," Hannibal exhales.

"Yeah," says Alana, apparently mistaking awe for shock. "The school called me and I went immediately. He didn't want you to be at the school, for some reason."

"How bad are his wounds?" Hannibal asks. "His hands - how bad are they?"

"Nothing too deep to be irreparable. His left hand is fine, it's his right that's mangled." Alana kneads her brow. "The school suspects trauma, but even so, instigating an attack like that... Will could be suspended or even expelled."

Hannibal purses his lips. "That may be preferable, for Will. If his schoolmates show little compassion for him when they know his father was murdered, they are not likely to become kinder on his return."

"You mean, pull him out, homeschool him?" Alana is incredulous. "He needs to be around people his own age, Hannibal. It's not healthy to be isolated from his peers."

"And look where *that* got him."

"Keep that up and I will have him into a hostel, Hannibal, I'm not kidding." Alana runs a frustrated hand through her hair. "He needs counseling, trauma counseling. I can do that, but not if you're supporting his resistance."

Hannibal narrows his eyes slightly. "Is that what I'm doing? He had them call you, did he not? I have not locked him in or kept him from others. As far as I can, I have offered him help in the form of you."

Alana flushes, repentant. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean... Hannibal, he needs therapy. Persuade him please."

Before they can continue, Will comes in. He looks withdrawn and - in Hannibal's eyes - gloriously, utterly contained in his fury. "I don't want to go to school anymore."

"Will," Alana begins, her tone placating.

"I'm not a kid," he says, "and you don't have to treat me like one. If you're discussing my future, I'd like to participate in it."

Hannibal straightens and nods. "You're right. However this is probably not the best time. Emotions are running high. Alana, if you would be so kind to join us on Wednesday for dinner? That would give Will sufficient time to consider the options."

"What are my options?"

"Continue with school, homeschooling here with Hannibal, moving to a hostel to be tutored." Alana folds her arms, her gaze firm. "Not for negotiation: you have to have therapy."

Will folds his arms too and scowls. "I don't want to."

"Will Graham, you were attacked and nearly killed. Your father was killed by the same man who tried to kill you. And your teacher has revealed that you have a history of fights in the school. Therapy is necessary." She softens and asks quietly, "It's not the expense you're worried about, is it?"

The young man looks away. "I don't want people poking around in my head."

"Will-"

"Dr Lecter."

Hannibal regards Will calmly, as though he hasn't been observing the exchange with rapt attention. "Will."

"I want Dr Lecter to be my therapist."

Alana looks scandalized. "He's your legal guardian."

"Temporary," says Will. "And-and it's not the official type. Not the whole let's talk about your feelings sort of thing, it'd just freak me out."

Alana hesitates, and looks to Hannibal. He is strongly reminded of how she used to come to him for help back when she was a student. He pretends to consider, and then says, "I am amenable to that. However, since this is not an actual doctor-patient situation, if anyone asks, I will be able to share what I've learned about you. Is that all right with you?"

Will chewed on his lower lip. Then he nods, jerkily. "With Dr Bloom, yes. Anything. I don't know about other people."

"I will be discreet." Hannibal smiles at Alana. "Does that reassure you?"

"We'll discuss it further on Wednesday," says Alana, both promise and threat, but she knows when she is beaten.

*****

Hannibal examines the stitches in Will's hand closely. It is done well, so he doesn't have the satisfaction of complaining about them. He wraps them up again and then encases Will's hand in a plastic glove and seals the opening with tape. "You're ready for your shower now," he says.

"How long before I can get the stitches out?"

"You sliced your hand open with a mirror shard, Will. Be glad you kept your tendons intact." Hannibal puts away his tools. His tone hardens. "What were you thinking, risking yourself?"

The worry he has kept on a leash since he heard Alana's report on what Will did lashes out. The young man flinches and his shoulders round immediately, although Hannibal has not raised his voice at all.

"Sorry," he whispers. "I wasn't. Um. I didn't think." He gulps and keeps his gaze lowered. "I'm sorry."

The doctor takes the injured hand again. He wishes he can convey his pride in Will's instincts. He wishes he could have seen it. "I want to hear everything."

Will's eyes flick from his hand to Hannibal's face, and then his cheeks redden. "I didn't start it."

"All right." Hannibal does not let go. He can feel Will's shyness emanating, and basks in the feeling for a few heartbeats. "Everything, Will."

The young man then shares with him the encounter, from Kelly Trent bracketing him against the sink to Will smashing the mirror to Will prying a shard of glass out to the part where Will's teacher tried to get Will to talk about his assault on Trent.

"Why didn't you tell her?" Hannibal asks.

"He's captain of the squad. I'm a ghost. He's the one cut up with glass, I'm the one holding it. Why dig myself a bigger hole?" Will's rueful smile is halfhearted and pained. "High school is hell."

Hannibal wants to hold him in his arms, kiss him on the brow, run his tongue over the blood that is still on his skin. He gives himself a stern mental shake. *Just a boy*, he warns himself again, knowing it is utterly pointless. He is already completely enchanted. He lets go of Will's hand.

Will risks meeting his eyes. "Is this the part where you tell me you're not angry, you're disappointed?"

"This is the part where I tell you to be careful when you wash yourself, and that I go and make dinner. I'm neither angry nor disappointed, Will, I just want you to take care of yourself and..." Hannibal's lips feel dry. "I want you to want to be happy."

"What's lost is lost," Will murmurs. He smiles sadly again. "Dad wouldn't have wanted me sad, would he?"

"I doubt he would. Now. I have steaks to deal with downstairs, and with your hand the way it is I will need to change my recipe." Hannibal stands. "Go on, Will."

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In the end, Will gets his way. On Friday, they finalize the paperwork. The school is eager to get a troublemaker out of the system.

He leaves the school office with Dr Bloom with something akin to giddiness, knowing that he will be learning from Dr Lecter instead.

"I will check in regularly too, Will," says Dr Bloom. She sighs. "I hope we're doing the right thing."

"I'll do better away from there," says Will with uncharacteristic confidence. He curls into himself and hugs his backpack. He won't be needing it much now, except maybe when he goes rambling in the hills in the future. "It's calmer with Dr Lecter only, and I don't have to deal with their gossip."

Dr Bloom pats his shoulder and drives him back to Dr Lecter's. Will tries not to mind her infrequent and friendly touches. She is kind and idealistic, her emotions more obvious than Dr Lecter's to read. Will likes her the way he liked Mrs De Costa. They try to be good people. There aren't many in the world like them. However, he resents being seen as a child. He has been taking care of himself for some time.

Dr Lecter is still at the office, though he assured Will he will be home by four. Will thanks Dr Bloom for the ride, and hurries into the house. Once inside, he whoops with genuine delight and covers his face, astonished at his own lack of restraint.

I'm free, he thinks, dizzy and nearly incoherent. *No more names, no more stares. I don't have to endure any of that any more.*

He nearly skips down the few steps to the sitting room. Then he gets a phone call from Dr Lecter.

"Will, I'm afraid you'll have to have dinner alone," says the doctor. He sounds echoey. *"I'm afraid I shall be rather busy with Mr Crawford."*

"I'll make myself a sandwich," says Will. "Is it something bad?"

"It's macabre and interesting." Dr Lecter sounds pleased, which is rather odd in Will's view, but then again Will can't always decipher what the psychiatrist's tone is, given the accent.

After he hangs up, the doorbell rings. Will frowns. Dr Lecter hardly has anyone visit him at home without prior invitation.

*****

"We have the identity of the corpse," Jack tells Hannibal. "I think you know of the man. Douglas Wilson. He was the second trombonist in the symphonic orchestra."

"His demise is sad, yet the quality of the orchestra will be improved," says Hannibal. It isn't the most politically correct thing to say, but Jack is used to his detached utterances. It isn't as though the BAU has him as a consultant because he feels for the victims.

On closer inspection, Hannibal has to applaud the workmanship. The vocal cords have been treated with chemicals and - a discreet sniff - olive oil. Hannibal fancies that if he has a bow, he would be able to play the corpse.

"This is not the culprit's first kill," he tells Jack. "It is practiced and skilled, the incisions decisive and clean. This is possibly the murderer's first staging, however; it is dramatic, almost excessively so, and clearly placed to attract attention."

"He's trying to get someone's attention?"

"I believe so." Hannibal retreats and places himself in the audience seats. "It is either one he admires or one he wishes to intimidate." He lets the thought sit inside Jack's mind, and then adds, "I'd suggest looking into all the music stores that have links to the orchestra, particularly those that specialize in string."

*****

When Hannibal gets home at six, he finds Will munching on a cucumber and tomato sandwich in the kitchen.

"You're home early," says Will. "Oops, sorry. Crumbs." He dusts them back onto his plate and dabs self-consciously at his lips.

"You appear more cheerful now," Hannibal remarks with a slight smile. Cheerful is a good look on Will Graham.

"I don't have to go back to school. It's a good thing." Will suddenly looks pensive and he stares absently at his sandwich. "Is it bad of me to be happy? I mean, Dad died two weeks ago. I'm supposed to be... I dunno. I'm supposed to be grieving."

Hannibal folds his jacket and vest on a chair and pulls out the tenderloin he has marinated overnight. He'll need to put in some finishing touches before he sets it to cook, and he is rather hungry. "I suspect your grief will never quite leave you, but at the same time life goes on, and we experience the entire range of emotions as we have to."

Will smiles at him and finishes his sandwich, rinsing off the plate and his hands. "I'll bring up your clothes."

"Thank you, Will, but I'll be heading up shortly. Could you dice up a carrot and a cup of celery for me please? Carefully. Don't strain that hand."

"Oh, um, Mr Budge asks that you test out the harpsichord."

Hannibal pauses. He knows his voice is utterly neutral when he says, "I'd quite forgotten the appointment. He's come by to restring it then?"

"Yeah, just after you called about not being home for dinner. He was quite sorry you weren't in, and he also, um, kinda scolded me about getting my hand injured." Will grabs the vegetables from the fridge. "He left a note on the harpsichord."

Hannibal hums acknowledgment and leaves Will to his task. He picks up the sealed envelope and scans the note, before folding it up neatly into his pocket.

How was the show, Dr Lecter? I can be persuaded to play in your home. Will is truly a lovely young man.

Hannibal allows a fleeting smile to grace his lips. Tobias Budge has just signed his death warrant.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On Saturday, someone from the morgue gives Will his father's ashes in a tasteful black urn. His father's belongings are in a similarly tasteful black box, which Dr Lecter holds for Will.

Will stares vaguely at the sheen on the surface of the urn. *I'm holding Dad in my hands,* he thinks, and has to fight down an inappropriate chuckle. Dr Lecter leads Will to the car and they sit in silence for a while, the doctor letting Will wander in the labyrinth of his mind. After about half an hour, Dr Lecter turns on the music - Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* - and slowly Will gathers his scattered thoughts.

"Where do you want your father to be, Will?" asks Dr Lecter.

Will blinks. He hasn't really thought about it. But with his father's ashes in his hands, Dave's death has finally solidified into reality. The young man nods. "There's a spot near my house," he tells Dr Lecter. "I think he'd like it there."

Dr Lecter glances over, and then drives them to where Dave Graham was murdered.

*****

Hannibal's shoes and clothes aren't really for traipsing cross country, but the leaves have yet to fall and the ground is carpeted with dried grass, so the risk of mud is minimal. Will doesn't even look at the house when he alights. Instead, he pulls on his new coat (Hannibal is pleased at how the earthy tones play up Will's summer-blue eyes) and tucks the urn in the crook of his arm.

"It's a fairly long trek," he says. "If you, um, if you wanna wait here...? I know your shoes aren't really for these sort of trails."

"I'll come with," says Hannibal. "Unless you wish to keep this location secret."

"No, not really." Will's boots scuff at the earth. "It's just... Only Dad and I know of it. Um. I'd like... I want you to know too."

They set off, and about five minutes into their trek three dogs traipse over, tongues lolling and tails wagging. Will smiles when they bump against him. Hannibal holds his tongue when they leave dirt marks on Will's new jeans; the young man looks comforted by their presence.

"Can't give you guys scraps any more," Will tells the dogs. One of them, a shaggy mongrel with brown, black, and white patches woofs as though in reproach. "I don't live there any longer, Casey. You'll have to adopt a new pup now that I'm gone."

Careful to use only his uninjured hand, Will tosses a branch for the dogs and strides on. The psychiatrist keeps pace, just a step behind, watching Will navigate the land with utter self-

assurance. The grace that Hannibal has observed before is more prominent in this natural setting. Will seems to know instinctively where to step, and the path he picks out is fairly smooth and unencumbered by fallen twigs or leaf litter.

"What do you plan to do with the property?" asks Hannibal. "Your father owns the house, I believe."

"Yeah. Some distant cousin died and Dad was the only one left, so he got it. I don't really know," says Will. In the company of canines he is less self-conscious, and there is a confidence in the way he carries himself. Hannibal thinks he may allow one dog in the future. "I guess I'll just have it torn down and then sell the land."

"You don't wish to return to it?"

"My Dad died there. I think I may end up seeing ghosts if I live there," says Will quietly. "I miss him badly enough not to need reminders."

Hannibal falls silent.

Will turns down a narrow path and then looks over his shoulder at the doctor. "Thanks, Dr Lecter. I don't know how I would've made it these couple weeks without you."

"I only offered what I have," says Hannibal. "You would have made it regardless, though I'm pleased I eased your way."

"Getting out of school is still the best thing ever to have happened. Dad would never have-" His voice hitches. "Dad knew I had trouble adjusting to school life, but he's been told all his life that a man needs to be educated to be successful. I tried, so hard, to just... to not be noticed, y'know. But I always end up... I always caused him trouble." He pulls a leaf from a branch and crumples it in his hand.

Hannibal reminds himself to get Will gloves. "Was what happened with Trent common?"

"Kinda. I'm okay when they talk about me. I know I'm abnormal and weird. But they'd say something against my dad or, you know, against you, and I'd flare up." Will picks up a broken branch next and tosses it, sending the three dogs running. "I don't know what that says about me."

"Would you want to tell me about the scars on your arms?" Hannibal presses gently.

Will shakes his head. "Not yet." He turns to the east and then picks out a path down a slope. "Another day, Dr Lecter."

*****

It is a lovely stream, fast-flowing and noisy. It appears fairly shallow, though Hannibal supposes the level rises in spring and summer. Will is gazing into the woods on the opposite bank, his eyes unfocused and gray.

"In summer, Dad brings me here to fish when neither of us are at work," says Will. There is a pensive smile on his lips that Hannibal wants to taste. "He's amazing. He can land ten fishes before I can land three. He knows how the fish work." He clears his throat. "Knew. He knew how the fish work."

Hannibal risks placing a hand on Will's shoulder. The young man leans slightly into the touch.

"Are you intending to scatter the ashes into the water?" Hannibal asks.

Will shakes his head. "Nah. He'd go nuts, all the fish around that he can't catch. I was thinking of placing the urn under a tree with a good view."

Hannibal lets Will sort it out. He supposes this is a calming place. The world is textured with sound: the rushing water, the rustling of leaf and branch, the occasional call of some bird in the distance. He prefers the orderliness of his memory palace, of course, but suspects that Will Graham would much prefer this location to any grand piazza or cathedral. Perhaps he can use this place to help Will manage his anger. Rage is a beautiful beast, but a beast not on a leash is only a nuisance and a monster.

The young man digs out a hole with his left hand and, after some consideration, places the urn into it. He then piles up the nearby leaves over the spot with his feet and stamp the leaf pile down awkwardly, before going to the water to rinse his hand clean. The doctor remembers doing the same, though she had not the dignity of an urn, and in that instant he almost resents Will.

He walks up to Will but stops in his tracks when Will looks up into the autumnal blue sky, shuts his eyes, and *sings*. After an astonished pause, Hannibal realizes that Will's singing *Blue Skies*. His voice is wobbly and his breath hitches on the first phrase. The tempo is much slower than it should have been sung. It is, after all, an eulogy of sorts; the original's lighthearted beat would be terribly amiss.

"*Blue days, all of them gone*," Will lets his voice soar, shaky and determined, "*Nothing but blue skies, from now on."*

Hannibal has listened to some of the best operatic voices around the world. He has never heard anything more exquisite than this.

Will sniffs, once, at the end of the song, and then glances once at Hannibal. "Dad's favorite song."

"It's beautiful," Hannibal says honestly. He waits until Will has composed himself and returned to his side. "Let's go home."

*****

That evening, they construct a simple routine together. Every evening after dinner, Dr Lecter will go over the work he sets Will and from there decide what Will is to work on next. In the mornings, after the psychiatrist has gone to his office, Will has to spend at least three hours

on his assignments before he does his other chores, and then return to complete whatever he needs to complete. Twice a week they are to go someplace away from the house, or do an activity that Will has never tried before.

"It ought to suffice," says Dr Lecter as he puts aside Will's school records. "You have an aptitude for mathematics and the humanities, as well as a keen eye for art. Fortunately, I speak a number of languages and have a certain level of confidence in the sciences."

"I can't thank you enough for this," says Will. He tugs at his sleeve again - he knows it's a bad habit but it's better than biting his nails - and asks, "Does it bother you?"

"Does what bother me?"

"That... I mean, I'm living under your roof, eating your food, and now you have to... I kinda demanded that you be my therapist. And my tutor." Will gulps. "I'm not easy to live with, I know that. And you've not said anything about, um, about when I have to move out."

Dr Lecter stares at Will for a long moment. Then he smiles, in that tight-lipped, almost unnoticeable way of his. "Will Graham. I am not your landlord. I am definitely not your therapist, though I will teach you certain anger management techniques. I am not your tutor, even though I am structuring your education to prepare you for college. And you will move out when you desire to, though selfishly I rather hope that would not be too soon."

Will's heart leaps into his throat.

"And you," says Dr Lecter, one elegant finger tipping up Will's chin so that he can meet Will's gaze, "are exceedingly considerate and polite, far more than some of my acquaintances whom I've had to put up."

"If you're not my, um, landlord, or my therapist, or my tutor," Will murmurs, hypnotized by the doctor's deep red eyes, "who are you?"

"Your friend. On my part, at least," says Dr Lecter. He releases the gaze and leaves the room.

Left alone, Will stares at his bandaged hand, confused and aware of the stirrings of guilt in his gut. He's already received so much; to ask for more will be greedy.

*****

Hannibal rests against the counter in his kitchen, the heart of his domain. His own heart feels overfull and alien to him. He pours himself some wine and considers making a start on tomorrow's meal preparations, but for some reason he has no desire to do anything culinary.

Instead, he heads to his harpsichord. The reminder that Budge has defiled his home makes his skin prickle unpleasantly. *You come into my home and you threaten my Will,* Hannibal thinks darkly, and he starts to play.

*****

Will hears the strains of the unfamiliar instrument and follows it to its source. There he sees Dr Lecter completely absorbed by his playing. Will closes his eyes and flows with the music. It is new to him, but Will can sense the tension and anger that radiates from every chord.

The music is suddenly cut off. Will opens his eyes with a jolt, but the doctor appears calm and collected. Nothing about his demeanor betrays the emotions Will heard earlier, but Will knows they are there, and he knows Dr Lecter knows that he knows.

"Will you need a piano to practice on?" Dr Lecter inquires, his smooth voice harsh as a whip in the sudden silence.

Will shakes his head. "I don't really... I can visualize. I just need to exercise my hands." He then holds up his right hand and winces apologetically. "I really shouldn't have... Trent wasn't worth this."

"No, he wasn't." Dr Lecter sighs. "Have you ever tried the harpsichord?"

*****

The rest of the night is spent in quiet denial. Hannibal pretends he is not affected by Will's knowing gaze nor the young man's proximity. He has already recognized the signs of obsession far before this moment; it became a fact of his life the moment he heard Will sing for his father. He is furious at himself for willfully widening this chink in his well-constructed fortress. Even a lesser predator like Budge can see it in a glance. Yet he cannot let Will go, not now. Not after they have built this fragile illusion of a life together.

Hannibal Lecter knows he has lost, irrevocably. It is up to Will now how they are to proceed. He prides himself on being a connoisseur in many things in life, partaking only in the best, yet in the area of affection, he is willing to accept whatever scraps Will sees fit to toss him.

"A piano hammers, but a harpsichord plucks," says Hannibal, silencing his internal commentary. "Hence the difference in sound."

"Not quite my instrument then," Will remarks. "Too gentle."

Hannibal smiles. He has had the same thought. "You probably wouldn't enjoy the theremin either."

"A theremin?"

"I have it in my bedroom." Hannibal knows Will tensed up but ignores it. "It's a fairly unconventional instrument. Someday I'll bring it out and we can play with it."

Will runs his left hand over the keys of the harpsichord and presses a few keys lightly. Then he places his hands in his lap and he starts rubbing his right wrist.

Hannibal glances over at the head of dark curls. "Would you like me to play for you?"

"Would you please?" Will asks, blue eyes impossibly bright.

There is nothing in the world that Hannibal can deny Will. He doesn't let Will know that, of course, but there's no need for self-deceit.

Will allowed him that intimacy with his grief; Hannibal can only offer the same.

*****

Dr Lecter plays from memory. His hands flow over the keys, the melody sweet and sorrowful. It starts off almost like a lullaby, and then expands and deepens into a tapestry of pure joy and love. Will keeps very still, his emotions melding with the melody coaxed forth. He even shallows his breathing to keep from disrupting Dr Lecter.

The music shifts into something darker, dizzier, and just as Will feels as though he is about to suffocate, Dr Lecter returns to the original, innocent melody, now overlaid with something heartbreakingly beautiful and poignant.

As the last note fades away, Will realizes his face is damp with tears, and Dr Lecter is very, very still at his harpsichord. The two wrap the silence around them. Will eventually scrubs at his face with his sleeves. Dr Lecter takes a deep breath and closes the cover of the harpsichord.

"I wrote that for my sister," he tells Will softly. He stands and exhales slowly. "I've not played that particular composition in years."

Will stands as well and moves close to the man, keenly aware that Dr Lecter has just shared something precious with him. "I didn't know you have a sister."

"I had a sister," Dr Lecter corrects. The doctor looks exceedingly tired and alone with that confession. "Mischa."

Will's heart clenches, and before he can stop himself he has taken Dr Lecter's right hand between his own. He wishes he is better with people. Other people will know what to say to the psychiatrist, to show that he understands what Dr Lecter has chosen to share with him. Instead, he keeps the older man's hand in his own, and hopes that he can warm the older man's heart with the clumsy gesture.

When Dr Lecter gently places his other hand over Will's left, Will thinks he sees a ghost of a smile on Dr Lecter's face, and they part quietly to return to their own bedrooms.

*****

That night, Will dreams of Dr Lecter's hand in his as they stroll along the riverbank, while his father watches from the middle of the river atop an island of antlers. Dave Graham is shouting something at his son, but Will doesn't hear him at all.

*****

*****

Hannibal finds himself savoring the recollection of Will's hands enveloping his own even as he waits for Franklyn to settle down. This is a last-minute appointment, requested by Franklyn who called and practically begged. The rotund man looks far more anxious than usual, his skin unappealingly blotchy and sweaty. The stench of fear assaults Hannibal's nose and he wonders what has Franklyn in such a state.

"Do you remember when I said Tobias was saying very dark things?" Franklyn blurts, not even waiting for Hannibal to ask the first question.

"I made note of it." The psychiatrist's pencil skates on the paper before him. He is drawing Will at the riverside, head tossed back to sing.

"Well, he said that he wanted to cut someone's throat and play it like a violin," says Franklyn. He runs his hands through his hair and pulls at his tie. "They found somebody whose throat was cut and played like a violin."

Hannibal almost smiles. He already knows Budge is behind the murder. He just wants to know why the man wants his attention quite so badly. "So you think Tobias killed that man at the symphony?"

"I don't know." The odious man rubs his sweaty palms over his knees. "If I do, do I have to report it?"

"Do you have a reason not to?" Hannibal's pencil hatch in the shadows of Will's curls. He will leave the eyes and lips for later, when he can fully concentrate.

Franklyn dithers. "What if I'm wrong?"

"What if you're right?"

"I'm always wrong," insists the other man. He sighs and whines, "I don't know. Why would he say something like that to me? Why do you think?" It takes him a moment before he realizes, "'Cause he knows I'd tell you."

Hannibal pauses. "Why would he want you to tell me?"

"I don't know." The man returns to his usual self-pitying whining and Hannibal lets him wear himself out worrying.

Finally, Hannibal says, "Go home and think about it, Franklyn. If you want, we can meet tomorrow and you can discuss your decision."

As expected, Franklyn perks up on the chance of seeing Hannibal so soon. He promises to think on what to do next and leaves, still stinking of fear and indecision.

Hannibal thinks he ought to pay Mr Budge of Chordophone a visit.

*****

He waits until there are other customers in the shop before he enters. Budge sees him and a sly look comes into his face. "Dr Lecter."

"Mr Budge." They do not shake hands. Hannibal says, "Thank you for restringing the harpsichord. It sounds wonderful."

"It was a pleasure. Will was very hospitable."

Hannibal does not rise to the bait, much as he wants to tear the throat out of this jackal. He lowers his voice while a girl of twelve or thirteen starts playing the baby grand on display. Her motions are practiced but emotionless. "You should move away as soon as you can."

"Why?" Budge is openly contemptuous.

"The FBI are closing in on you, Tobias," Hannibal warns. "It was reckless of you; you exposed yourself."

Budge grins. "Franklyn gave you my message."

"They will find you."

"Let them," Budge says. The girl has stopped playing and now her father is trying it out. He is marginally better.

"You want to get caught?"

"I want them to try." The man narrows his eyes. "They'll send men, and I'll kill them. Then I'll kill Franklyn before I disappear."

Hannibal does not wrinkle his nose in disgust at the other man's apparent glee in anticipation. "Why didn't you kill me? Lean animals yield the toughest gut."

"I was," Budge admits, "until I realized that you have Will. I know what kind of men are drawn to that boy, Dr Lecter. I've known it since summer. Killing you so soon..." He smirks. "The satisfaction is not in killing you. And I do have a soft spot for the boy."

"You will not go near him ever again," Hannibal says softly. There is no threat in his tone at all.

Tobias Budge raises an eyebrow. "We'll see."

The family heads to the counter to pay and Hannibal leaves. He'll give Budge a day to do the smart thing. The presentation had been rather exquisite, after all, and artistry should be allowed to flourish. However, even Hannibal has a limit to his patience, and Budge has used up his share for bringing Will into the picture.

*****

Late into the afternoon, Will has just finished making notes on what he thinks are the themes of *Don Quixote* when he notices a message on his phone. It is from Dr Bloom.

'Abigail Hobbs just woke up. Media alerted. Be careful whom you speak to. Watch out for red-haired woman named Freddie Lounds. She will needle you until you retort.'

He exhales heavily and crosses his arms about his body, leaving the document unsaved on the laptop. Abigail Hobbs is awake. He doesn't know how to feel about that. Relief that she isn't dead, perhaps. Or maybe anger for her not dying by her father's hand. Maybe resentment. Will digs his fingers into his ribs and winces as some of the old bruises protest the treatment. At least he hasn't new ones to layer over them.

The guilt crashes into him immediately for thinking that. He clears his throat and returns to his file. He can't write at the moment so he types, one-handed; the stitches itch and he cautiously wiggles his fingers and tries to flex his palm slightly.

The door opens and Dr Lecter peeks in. "Ah. There you are."

"Welcome home," says Will. He hides his right hand under the table.

The psychiatrist enters and peers over Will's shoulder. The young man breathes in Dr Lecter's cologne. It is far less irritating than his dad's Old Spice, and far more exotic. It suits Dr Lecter perfectly.

"That looks satisfactory," Dr Lecter pronounces. Then he perches on the edge of the table. "Hand."

"What?"

"Your right hand, Will. Don't think I didn't see you trying to hide it from me. What have you been doing with it?" Dr Lecter does not wait for an answer as he removes the bandages and frowns at the healing wound. "More haste, less speed. Come, let's get it wrapped up so you can shower while I prepare dinner."

"Dr Bloom texted me," Will says in a rush.

Dr Lecter pauses. "What about?"

Will shows him the message, and then shifts his weight from foot to foot. "It's... it's kinda odd. I don't really..." he trails off, unsure what he intended to say in the first place.

The older man regards him for a few heartbeats. "Do you wish to see her?"

"... I think so."

"Then we will go tomorrow. Come to my office at noon, I have just the sole appointment in the morning. We'll have lunch at my office and then we will go to the hospital together." Dr Lecter traces over the neat stitches and adds, "These need seeing to as well. I want to know what sort of physiotherapy will be needed to ensure the palm will heal with your full range of motion."

Will nods. The decision is made. He will see her, and maybe then he will know how exactly he feels towards the girl whose father killed his dad.

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TattleCrime has already an article on the Hobbs girl waking up. Apparently the FBI found the hair of all the other girls stuffed into the cushions inside the Hobbs' residence. Hannibal scans through the article and pauses on the picture of the antler room that Lounds no doubt snuck into to get a photo. She is pernicious and persistent. Someday, Hannibal will need to get rid of her.

He closes the cover of his tablet and turns off his bedside lamp. He knows that Garrett Jacob Hobbs has probably fed the girls to his family. Hannibal finds that unremarkable and banal. Since Garrett Jacob Hobbs wants nothing more than to keep his daughter with him, he should have acted upon that desire, rather than butcher eight other girls with hardly any flair at all. The utterly pedestrian approach Hobbs took bores Hannibal.

If you're going to kill, then do it for a meaningful purpose.

Yet, it was Hobbs' actions that drove Will into Hannibal's life. The doctor allows his mind to shift into more pleasing thoughts. These days, Will wears the coat often and is slowly filling out his thin frame. There is less hesitation about touching the objects inside Hannibal's home, and Hannibal delights in seeing Will run his fingers over the spines of his extensive collection of books.

He relaxes into his bed and sinks into his memory palace. It is an enormous space, and there are areas that he will not wander willingly, but now he heads straight for the greenhouse. There the flowers of his childhood do not fade and the herbs from his mother's garden never wither, and in the center of it is his table from his study.

He sets the crystal globe with Will's smiling face aside, and savors the clean scents of Will Graham from the perfume bottle. It is richer now with different notes: Will in the morning has the heady rush of dew and damp birch overlaid with something earthy; Will in the evening smells gentler, with hints of paper and ink, and occasionally lavender and sandalwood, the shampoo and body cleanser that Hannibal provides for the guest rooms.

Hannibal unravels a stained bandage and places it in a box of ivory padded with creamy silk. The warmth is subtle; the texture against Hannibal's hands excruciatingly delightful. His fingers linger over it and then he shuts the box.

Taking pride of place is a small oval case of rosewood and mother-of-pearl inlay, and when Hannibal holds it to his ear, he can hear Will Graham singing. Will's voice will never win any awards, but the honest emotion that shimmers in blinding brilliance digs into every inch of Hannibal's heart, until he can once again *feel*.

He lingers in the greenhouse until his mind wanders into dreamless sleep, lulled by the lyrics of *Blue Skies* sung by a young man grieving.

*****

Hannibal offers yet another tissue for the sniveling Franklyn. He can't wait for the man to leave so he and Will can go to the hospital.

"You're the ninth therapist to offer me a referral!" Franklyn wails. "*You* were a referral!"

"I am also part of the problem," says the doctor. "You focus too much on your therapist and not enough on your therapy. Since I cannot help you, it would be illogical and unethical for me to keep you as a patient."

"Is this because I won't report him?"

"We have not discussed that," says Hannibal. "You do not wish to report Tobias?"

Franklyn is saved from answering when the emergency exit bangs open.

Tobias Budge is there with a bloodstained shirt and in an incandescent rage. "Report Tobias for what?"

Hannibal observes as Franklyn blubbers. Budge's right ear is bleeding; possibly whichever poor soul that was sent to his place managed at least one good shot. Franklyn is slow on the uptake, visibly recoiling when he finally realizes his friend's shirt is spattered with crimson. "Oh my God, is that your blood?"

"I just killed two men," Budge brags, his eyes never leaving Hannibal. "The police came to question me about the murder."

I haven't even contacted Jack, Hannibal thinks, but then again there are only so many music supply shops in the city. "Franklyn, I want you to leave now," he says.

"Stay right where you are, Franklyn," Budge orders.

The neurotic man falters, not sure whom to obey, and then starts talking again, trying to persuade Budge into giving himself up. If Hannibal were a crass man, he'd be rolling his eyes. Instead he strides up to Franklyn and neatly breaks his neck.

Budge has the audacity to look affronted. "I was looking forward to that."

"I saved you the trouble," says Hannibal, and sheds his jacket. No more disguises.

The other man pulls out a piano wire and starts swinging it; he is leaner, younger, and perhaps faster. Hannibal has home ground advantage, and he knows his strength. Time to see which is the alpha predator.

Budge rushes Hannibal and they careen backwards into Hannibal's table. The doctor sweeps across the surface for a weapon. As he expected, Budge is fast, cracking a knee into his ribs and sending the doctor stumbling into his ladder. Budge then grabs his letter opener and stabs it into Hannibal's thigh.

*****

Will jogs up the steps to Dr Lecter's office. The bus ride over is shorter than he expected and he wonders if he has to wait a long time. A quick glance at the phone tells him he is fifteen minutes early. Briefly he considers going for a walk around the block, but Dr Lecter may be done with his appointment early. His head jerks up when he hears a crash inside the office, followed by a muffled shout.

He pushes open the door and freezes.

Dr Lecter is pinned against a ladder and Mr Budge has drawn back an arm to punch the older man. Will's sudden appearance startles both of them.

"Will, run!" Dr Lecter rasps.

Mr Budge snarls and yanks something from Dr Lecter's leg. He stabs forward but Dr Lecter falls to the side just in time to dodge the attack. The doctor then stumbles to his feet, trying to get to Will, but Mr Budge launches himself at Dr Lecter and the two men crash to the floor.

Will doesn't even think. He runs into the office and barrels into Mr Budge, shoulder first, and knocks him off his feet. The teenager crashes into the wall. Mr Budge clambers to his feet, murder in his eyes.

"I should've killed you that day," he growls. "Turn you into a harp for your darling doctor."

Will scrambles upright, suddenly aware of the bloody blade in the other man's hand. His left arm is braced against the wall, brushing against a pedestal and nearly knocking the heavy statue over.

*****

Over the ringing in his ears from the fall, Hannibal registers Budge is advancing on Will. Hannibal ignores the blood from his lip and the pain in his thigh to grab Budge's leg. He yanks the man off balance, away from Will.

The letter opener slices down again and Hannibal rolls aside. The blade sticks into the floor but Budge manages to land his hands on Hannibal's throat and immediately tries to strangle Hannibal.

Hannibal tries to reach up to Budge's face but the dark man ducks away easily. He bears down again. Hannibal's right hand tries to grab the letter opener, but it lies just outside his reach.

Then Budge rears back with a pained cry. Hannibal coughs breath into his lungs, just in time to see Will smash his stag statuette into Budge's skull.

The man stares, and then topples over.

*****

"Oh my god," Will whispers, the statuette falling with a heavy thunk. He feels sick. "Oh god. Oh my god."

Dr Lecter sits up slowly. His left thigh is bleeding. "Will."

"I killed him," Will says, eyes fixed on the fallen man. "I killed Mr Budge." He can't breathe. The air feels thin and he can't look away. There is hardly any blood but he knows just how desperate he was when he swung the statue twice.

"Will. Come here." The doctor's voice startles Will out of his horrified focus. He goes to Dr Lecter and kneels next to him, unsure what he should do. The older man seems all right. However, he appears very worried. "Come here."

*****

He never wants to see that same horror in Will's eyes again. Will comes to him quickly. His right hand is twitching; Hannibal suspects that the stitches have torn, but adrenaline would dull the pain for a moment longer.

"Is it bad?" Will asks.

Hannibal doesn't answer. Instead he draws Will into an embrace, tucking the younger man's face into the crook of his neck. Trembling from shock, Will sinks into the hold readily, his thin arms wrapping around Hannibal's neck and his frame curling against the doctor's torso.

Hannibal risks pressing his lips to dark brown curls. It is as soft as he imagined, and a potpourri of the most fascinating scents. "Hush, Will, it's all right. I'm fine. We're both fine. You saved my life."

"I killed Mr Budge," Will repeats in a murmur.

"You saved my life," Hannibal assures, one hand patting Will's shoulders and the other winding into Will's curly hair. "He was going to kill me. You had no choice."

Will clutches Hannibal more tightly. "Will they take me away? Are they going to arrest me?"

"I won't let them," Hannibal promises. He is surprised at his own vehemence.

He holds Will until the young man stops shaking. Will never looks up from Hannibal's shoulder. He contemplated for a second whether to ask Will to get his own phone from his discarded jacket, but that would mean Will seeing Budge's and Franklyn's corpses. Instead, he rocks Will against himself, devouring every minute detail of Will's body pressed to his. The police can wait.

*****

"PD just located the two uniforms he killed in his basement. Lots of gut, apparently." Mr Crawford stuffs his hands into his coat's pockets. "Why did he come here?"

"He came to kill my patient," says Dr Lecter, his right hand squeezing Will's left and a smile fluttered briefly over his face. "Will saved my life."

"You hit Tobias Budge with the statue?" an Asian woman asks gently. When Will nods, she says, "I'm Beverly Katz and I need your fingerprints. To verify your story."

Will curls into the doctor's plaid jacket which has been tossed over him, his eyes not leaving Dr Lecter. When the older man nods, Will obediently holds out both hands and lets Beverly roll ink over the fingertips and then press each digit to a piece of paper. She helps wipe the ink off with moist cotton pads and ruffles Will's hair. He lets her.

EMTs hover in the background, uncertain what to do. The doctor waved them off earlier, saying that he will see to the injury later at home, but insisted they change Will's bandages. The stitches are mostly intact, thankfully, and there is minimal bleeding.

Mr Crawford is staring and not hiding his staring very well. "Why did Budge want your patient dead?"

"Franklyn seemed to know more than he was telling me, but he had just raised some concerns about Tobias Budge," Dr Lecter replies. His jaw twitches, as though wincing. "Budge came in and snapped Franklyn's neck. And then he attacked me."

Will shivers again and reaches for Dr Lecter's hand, wanting reassurance that the man is really there. Dr Lecter does not pull away; he squeezes Will's fingers.

"I worked for him but he never let me go to the back of the shop," he says quietly. "I let him into the house. He could've... oh god." He looks green again.

Dr Lecter tugs on Will's hand, pulling him closer, until Will presses his forehead to Dr Lecter's shoulder.

"I think," says the psychiatrist, "we need to go home."

"I can send you," says Mr Crawford. Will picks up on the disapproval in the large man's voice and digs his fingers into Dr Lecter's palm. He's already overwhelmed; Mr Crawford broadcasts his emotions and Will is not able to process them now.

Dr Lecter must have understood him. "It's all right. You're needed here. Let one of the police officers do their duty."

Mr Crawford can't turn down the reasonable suggestion.

Still, Will separates enough for Dr Lecter to stand, and then he steps forward to help the limping Dr Lecter to the car. It should ease Mr Crawford's doubts somewhat. Throughout the journey, however, Will never lets go of the psychiatrist's hand, as though it is the only thing keeping Will from drowning.

Chapter End Notes

Blue Skies, Frank Sinatra rendition

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will keeps himself close to Dr Lecter until they are at the door, and when the officer asks if he can be of further assistance, Will wants to scream. His head is full of faces, the fight replaying endlessly in surround sound. He can sense the smooth chill of the stag on his skin, he can see the shock in Mr Budge's eyes, he can feel the impact jarring his arms again and again and again-

"Will. Come back to me." Dr Lecter's tone is commanding.

The young man gasps and stares at Dr Lecter, who is now cradling his face in warm hands. The door is shut, and they are now alone. Will holds on to that contact. He shivers again and has to wrap his arms around his middle. He feels like throwing up. To Will's grateful astonishment, Dr Lecter does not remove his hands from Will's face until the teenager swallows and nods.

The psychiatrist exhales heavily. "I'm sorry. You should never have been put in that position. My role as FBI consultant has put you in danger."

"I... It's over. Your leg," Will stammers. "We need to, um, see to your leg."

They hobble up the stairs, Dr Lecter grimacing slightly when he has to put weight on his left leg, but they eventually make it to the doctor's bedroom.

"I can take care of it now, Will," says Dr Lecter kindly, carefully limping over to his bed. It's larger than Will's and covered with deep blue sheets that holds a sheen to the fabric. It looks decadent and Will has a fleeting thought about who Dr Lecter has shared the bed with.

He hesitates in the doorway. "I want to help."

There must have been something in his face because the older man relents. "If you could get my kit from the study? I'll sort it out after I clean the wound."

*****

Hannibal wakes in the middle of the night. There is someone in the house, moving quietly towards his room. He reaches for a pewter figurine he keeps as a paperweight by his bed, and rolls out of his sheets on silent feet.

The intruder pauses outside his bedroom.

Hannibal waits in a crouch, easing his weight off his left leg.

Whoever it is turns away and walks down the hallway. The doctor's brow creases faintly and then realizes it has to be Will. He pulls on his dressing gown and walks into the hallway, just

in time to see Will about to enter his own room.

"Will?"

"Dr Lecter. Um. Sorry. Did I wake you? I, uh, I'm gonna-" Will's hands gesture helplessly.

"You couldn't sleep," Hannibal states.

Even in the darkness Hannibal can see Will's discomfort. "I guess I just... I keep seeing." His arms lock around his abdomen, his usual protective gesture. "Sorry. I'll just... try to, um, I'll try to sleep."

"Do you need to talk?" asks Hannibal.

"Not really. Um. I shouldn't keep you up." Will bobs his head and disappears into his room.

The doctor hates the sound of the door closing with every fiber of his being.

*****

*****

"The state attorney won't press charges against you or Will," Jack tells Hannibal when he visits the doctor in his home two days after the attack. They are in the dining room, enjoying a bottle of savagnin after a seafood dinner. "Budge is a mass murderer after all, and Hobbs definitely killed those girls. It won't look good."

"I should be glad that Mr Steinberg is concerned with his public image," Hannibal says dryly. He's glad that Will has already retreated to his room. Since Budge's attack, the young man has reverted to his withdrawn self. "How is Hobbs, by the way?"

Jack turns the glass and takes a mouthful. "He's in bad shape. Dr Hazlinda tells me that there's renewed intracranial bleeding. They're doing what they can. Remind me never to cross you, Dr Lecter."

"If he dies..."

"If he dies, then the only person who knows what happened to the girls is Abigail Hobbs. She's insisting she doesn't know, however." The FBI agent's frustration is evident.

Hannibal considers the situation. He isn't sure how Will is going to respond to her, and he does not want the young man to empathize with Abigail Hobbs at all. The fact that she is the trigger that led to so much of Will's grief rankled.

He makes a decision. "She knows. Hobbs' actions were meant to secure her loyalties. It would be meaningless if she had no idea what he was doing. In fact, I suspect she was complicit in his crimes."

"Will you speak with her then?"

"Of course." Hannibal tops up his glass and Jack's. "But you're not here just for the Hobbs girl, are you Jack?"

Jack has the grace to look contrite. "I am concerned about you and your... charge."

"Will is my live-in personal assistant. There is nothing improper between us."

"Yet anyone who saw the way he was holding on to you," says Jack slowly, "would assume otherwise."

Hannibal flicks a glance at the agent. "Let them assume what they wish. Will's needs are more important than petty gossip."

To his credit, Jack Crawford knows not to push Hannibal. After all, the psychiatrist is one of the finest consultants Jack has access to - Hannibal is familiar with how killers think, after all, not that he intends to share that fact with the agent - and to antagonize him would mean losing a valuable asset. If there's one thing Hannibal can rely on about Jack, it's that the heavyset man will do anything to ensure killers get caught, even if some other laws are bent along the way.

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The morning after Mr Crawford's visit, Will is deep in discussion with Dr Lecter over the chivalric code embraced by Don Quixote when the doorbell rings. They glance at each other from where they're set up a sort of camp in front of the fireplace in the sitting room.

"I wasn't expecting visitors," says Dr Lecter.

Will gets up to get the door. It has been a pleasant couple of days, despite the niggling fear that he will be arrested over the death of Tobias Budge. However, late last night Dr Lecter informed him that the police won't be prosecuting him for self-defense. Still, this is the second case of death due to self-defense in Will's life. Will isn't certain what this says about Fate or God or karma.

"Dr Bloom, hi," says Will. Behind her is the Asian woman who took his fingerprints. Will manages a quick smile. "Ms Katz. Hello."

"Ach, Beverly is fine. How are you?" Beverly grins. "Alana was getting worried so I drove us down. Hope you don't mind unexpected visitors."

Will hesitates at the door. "Uh, I-I suppose it's all right. Dr Lecter and I are in the sitting room."

"Nice pullover," Beverly comments. "A little large on you though."

Will fights down a blush. Dr Lecter had passed it to him after their midnight conversation. It smells a little like Dr Lecter's cologne and it is very reassuring to hold when he wakes up, cold and terrified and alone. His nightmares these past few nights have all involved Dr Lecter being killed, so having the pullover calms him down. He tells himself it's not a security blanket, but he's never very convinced.

Dr Bloom leads the way to the sitting room. Her familiarity with the space irks Will slightly. Instead of acknowledging his annoyance, he offers to bring them drinks.

"Water for me," says Dr Bloom. "I have to leave for a lecture soon."

"Juice if you have it." Beverly smiles. "Hi Dr Lecter. Nice digs."

Dr Lecter inclines his head, a king greeting his subjects. "Ms Katz. Good morning. Alana, what's the matter? You don't usually come by this early."

"Well..." Dr Bloom glances at Will. He gets the message and goes to the kitchen, leaving the adults to talk. He chews on his thumbnail, and hurriedly stops. Dr Lecter doesn't like him doing that.

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"Jack has been interrogating Abigail," says Alana without preamble. "He tells me you are convinced she is an accomplice."

"An accomplice or perhaps the lure. She knows something, Alana." Hannibal looks up at Beverly Katz. "I heard that you've found cushions stuffed with the girls' hair."

"Lounds, huh."

Hannibal's mouth curls. "A veritable goldmine of information."

Katz sighs. "We have. The families want to know what happened to the bodies. Abigail should have some idea."

Alana brushes her hair from her face. "Bev, I thought you were on my side."

"I'm on the side of the evidence, sweetie." The agent smiles ruefully.

Hannibal has not quite figured out what sort of relationship the two women have, but they are intimates. "And you needed Will out of here because...?"

"Because she's been asking for him," Alana admits. "Ever since she woke up, she's been asking for her father and for Will Graham. I'm not sure it's wise for them to meet."

Fascinating. Hannibal mulls over the implications. "She needs some form of closure. They don't have to talk; she just has to see that he's alive, and that he's taken care of. Will and I will go to the hospital together then. We were planning to go on Tuesday when... well. When Budge happened."

"At least the bastard's put down," Katz offers.

Will returns with a glass of ice water and a glass of juice, together with a teapot and two teacups. He doesn't look at any of the adults as he pours the tea for Hannibal and himself, while Alana and Katz take their drinks with soft 'thank-yous'.

"Will, Abigail's been asking about you," says Hannibal gently. "Do you want to see her?"

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The young man pauses and then sets his teacup down with a clatter. His left hand curl into a fist and his right tenses, his fingers tugging on his pants. It astonishes him that he is abruptly filled with anger on hearing her name. But anger is an emotion hiding something else - Dr Lecter told him that last evening while checking on his injury. Will slows his breathing and forces himself to relax. From the look in Dr Lecter's eyes, the psychiatrist has noticed Will's efforts in dealing with his temper and is proud of him.

"Yes," he says. "But I don't want to talk to her."

Dr Bloom and Beverly exchange a look. Will thinks they may be a couple, the way they can discuss things with eye contact. Eventually, Dr Bloom places her glass on Will's tray and Beverly follows suit.

"All right," says Dr Bloom. "My lectures finish at two. I'll meet you both at the hospital."

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Hannibal watches Will staring through the glass at the girl in her wheelchair. Abigail Hobbs looks fragile and breakable, and the scar on her neck is livid. The doctor wonders what Will is thinking. Alana is inside, talking at Abigail, who is clearly not listening, her gaze fixed on the boy whose life she has changed irrevocably.

"I hate her," Will whispers, "and yet I feel as though I have to thank her." He turns away from the window and slumps into a chair.

Hannibal takes the seat beside him. Will needs gloves; thankfully, the cut on his right hand is clean and fairly shallow, a single line drawn from the abductor pollicis transversus to abductor digiti quinti, the wound deeper near the edges of the palm, with some smaller cuts on his fingertips that have already healed. It is by sheer luck that Will's tendons have not been harmed at all. If he had managed even one stab, the pressure would have severed a number of tendons and damaged his hand irreparably. Hannibal does not believe in God, but he thinks that if there is one, He at least has small mercies.

"Why would you say that?"

"She must've said something to her father about me," says Will. "I mean, an umbrella. It could've been her friends or, I dunno, even one she picked out of the trash. But she told him it was from me. And for some reason her father thinks I'm a threat." His voice thickens. "He killed my dad because of something she said."

Hannibal is enjoying how Will has placed the blame on Abigail. He has worried that the young man might commiserate with her. "Her father's psychosis is not her fault."

"No, but she must have seen something. Known something. All these missing girls - they were on newspapers and I bet they were on TV. They looked like her," says Will. He pulls on his sleeves again, except it's Hannibal's red pullover that Will's fidgeting with. The doctor ignores the potential damage; it is a wonderful feeling, wrapping the young man up in Hannibal's own clothes. "I've seen it on that website you read. TattleTale?"

"Tattle Crime."

"Yeah, that." Will nibbles on his lower lip, turning it a deep pink. "But... but dad's death... I mean, it's horrible for me to say this, and I don't- I love him, you know? He's my dad. He tried. But since his death, my life has been... it's been better. So I don't even know whether I ought to... I hate her for my dad's death. But she also... You wouldn't have become my friend if not for her."

The teenager flushes and stares at his feet. Hannibal resigns himself to becoming familiar with the frustration of wanting to kiss Will and being unable to do so.

"If I may," says the doctor, "I was intending to fight for you to have regular meals at my place before the events of that terrible night. I would have been your friend regardless."

Will's gaze flicks up to Hannibal's own, and then darts aside. The tops of his ears are pink. "That's... that's true. And, um, thanks. And I'm yours, too."

Hannibal traps the words in amber and then remarks casually, "We should talk to the physiotherapist. I'm sure you'll want the full range of motion for your hand if you wish to perform for Mrs Komeda."

"The benefit? But Mr Budge-"

"She and I are friends. I've had her over for dinner a few times, and I assure you, she will not cancel her benefit for young musicians just because the man coordinating the performances happened to be less than upright." Hannibal smiles. "In fact, once the stitches are removed and your hand regains its flexibility, I may ask her to let you practice on her Blüthner baby grand."

It will be worth holding another dinner party for Mrs Komeda for her to give permission; the look on Will's face is beyond Hannibal's skill with the pencil to recreate.

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Abigail Hobbs continues insisting on her innocence, but Jack Crawford persists in digging for a truth from the girl, and his tenacity is estranging him from Alana Bloom. The Monday following Budge's attack, Hannibal's leg does not give him much trouble when he walks and he keeps his promise to interview her. They do so in the interrogation room under Jack's watchful eye, and Alana's hesitant one.

"I didn't mean to tell Dad about Will," she says. "I'm glad he's all right. He's with you now, isn't he? Can you tell him I'm sorry about his father?"

"You did mean to tell your father." Hannibal holds her gaze until she averts her eyes. "You even made sure to point out that it was someone he has seen before. Will told me you two have never talked in school. You would have had to describe him to your father, and you did."

"No, Dad just asked-"

"You liked the attention, did you not?"

Her eyes fill with tears. Hannibal's contempt for her rises, but he doesn't let it show. "I didn't - how can you say that?"

"It is the truth," Hannibal replied. "You liked that he loved you to the point of obsession. You enjoyed the fact that your father was willing to do so much to keep you with him."

"No, that's not true," she gasps weakly.

"You used your impending departure as the lure to get him to kill the other girls." Hannibal's face remains impassive. "Did they taste pleasant, Abigail, knowing he's actually eating you?"

Abigail blanches. "No, it wasn't like that, he said he was honoring- Oh god. Oh god." She suddenly realizes she has just admitted her guilt, and her entire demeanor changes. Her expression hardens and she hisses, "I don't want to talk to you anymore."

Hannibal leaves the room. He finds Alana and Jack on the other side of the glass, Alana looking aghast and Jack triumphant. Both are repugnant in the extreme, and Hannibal wants the balm of Will's presence.

"You have what you were looking for," says Hannibal.

"You knew he was eating them?" Alana whispers.

Hannibal regards her. For all they see and hear in their chosen careers, Alana Bloom believes that people are inherently good. To know that Abigail Hobbs is not... He can afford to be kind.

"I deduced. A chance remark from Will. He said that he saw Garrett Jacob Hobbs and his daughter go hunting. A good hunter does not waste his catch. Since no body has been found thus far, the logical assumption is that there is no longer any body to be found."

"They cannibalized the girls," Jacks states flatly. He folds his arms. "Thank you, Dr Lecter. You have been a great help."

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Two weeks after Abigail Hobbs' inadvertent confession, her father passes away in his sleep. Will is not too pleased about that. Then again, the girl is charged as an accessory to eight murders, and he finds enough vindictiveness in himself to rejoice in that.

It has been a pleasant two weeks in the meantime. Will is used to the learning routine now, and likes the structure of being able to progress at his own pace. He soaks up the literary discussions and the digressions that spring up organically - the latest being a debate over the merits of *Romeo and Juliet* and the role of women in society, now that they have finished Don Quixote. Dr Lecter has been openly scornful of Romeo and Juliet. Will sees the appeal in it, however, and their discussions have been involved and exciting.

Other than their discussions, Will has begun to notice more and more things about the doctor that is appealing. He tries not to show his growing captivation, but it is a difficult thing. He doesn't mean to obsess. It is however hard to rationalize why Will wants to impress the doctor and why he wants to make the calm, composed doctor laugh.

For the past two days, Will has been on his own: Dr Lecter has been called away to Grafton, and is to return that evening. Tomorrow they will go out and Will wonders where they can go.

The leaves are brilliant with color; Will considers his options, and thinks that the doctor may enjoy some baked sweet potatoes, the way he and his dad did it. It's been slightly over a month and he's coming to terms with Dave's death more fully. Some days he doesn't remember at all, and then a chance remark or a stray object will slam his grief into his chest.

He is headed back to his father's house to retrieve his old pair of threadbare gloves, two scarfs and a parka before the snow. Will knows that Dr Lecter wants to buy him a coat, but the young man cannot in good conscience allow the doctor to do so when his old parka is perfectly functional. It is very odd, returning to the old house - he doesn't even think it *home* any longer - and seeing the rough bones of the structure after more than a month in his stately new home.

In the end, Will leaves the police tape where it is stretched across the opening and ducks under it. His eyes take in the marks of dried blood where Garrett Jacob Hobbs had put his hand, where Dr Lecter nearly punched his head in. A movement at the corner of his vision startles him and he whirls around.

"You're dead," Will says aloud, his voice astonishingly steady.

Dave Graham smiles, crooked and warm. "I am."

"I'm sorry," says Will. He doesn't even feel nervous. This is his father, and now his father is forever out of the reach of alcohol. "Dr Lecter is good to me. He's good for me."

"I know. I wasn't. I wish I were." Dave cocks his head. He is bleeding from the neck and from a vertical line along his belly, but thankfully his guts are not spilling out.

Will wonders why he's not terrified that he's talking to his dead father. Then again, he did tell Dr Lecter before that he is likely to see ghosts if he lived here. Who knows what his mind

comes up with? The young man swallows. "I miss you. But... but I think... I think this is the best possible outcome."

Dave sighs again. "You were going to leave and do better than me. At least now you have a proper chance. Go on, Will." He pauses and smiles again. "Thank you for the song, boy."

Now tears prickle at Will's eyes. "I do miss you."

Dave does not speak. When Will blinks, the vision is gone. Will inhales and then sighs before going to his room to gather up what he came here to get. When he is about to leave, he sees his father's materials for his lures scattered across his worktable. He knows which one was named for him and which for his long-dead mother, and the latest one that Dave was working on before he died is still incomplete.

"Go on," Dave's voice murmurs, or Will's memory of Dave. Will isn't sure anymore.

Will finishes the final one.

"You gotta name it," Dave says. He's nowhere to be seen.

Will allows a shy smile and whispers, "Hannibal."

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Will is elated to see Dr Lecter already in the kitchen when he gets home. The sight of the doctor with an apron sends a warm feeling spreading through Will's belly. He thinks it's mostly a Pavlovian response.

It doesn't detract from the pleasure of seeing the broad-shouldered man working in the heart of his kingdom with his sleeves rolled up. Wll resolutely does not stare at the bared forearms. He should be immune to the sight by now, but the short absence has eroded Will's resistance.

"You've been out alone," says Dr Lecter neutrally before Will can speak. He does not look at Will other than the first cursory glance.

That sounds almost like a rebuke. Will shuffles his feet and bites his lower lip. "Um. I was at Dad's place. To get my coat and gloves and, uh, scarves."

"I could've driven us there," says Dr Lecter. He still sounds distant and aloof.

Will feels as though he's been slapped. He clenches his left hand and then says, "I'm going to, um. I'm gonna go. Put away my things."

*****

Hannibal feels guilty the instant Will disappears, but he has yet to quell the panic that nearly overwhelmed him when he came back to an empty home. Visions of Will attacked and killed - and Hannibal knows so many *interesting* ways this could be done, not least the latest human totem pole that he has just marveled at in Grafton - assaulted him. Yet it has been unfair for him to be this curt with Will; the young man has done nothing wrong.

With a sigh Hannibal puts aside his knife and covers the kidneys he is preparing. He can't cook in this mental and emotional state.

When he knocks on Will's door, he wonders if the young man will turn him away. He deserves it, in Hannibal's opinion. Will is not a child and is perfectly capable of doing things. "Will? May I come in?"

The door opens silently and Will steps aside for Hannibal to enter. The older man is struck with contrition. Will's eyes are a little red-rimmed and he doesn't meet the doctor's eyes.

"I'm sorry," says Hannibal immediately. "I came home and was worried when you weren't here. I called but I couldn't get you."

"No signal out there in the sticks," says Will quietly, still avoiding eye contact.

"Will, I'm really sorry." Hannibal reaches out a hand tentatively to brush over the healed mark on Will's cheek.

The contact finally drags Will into looking at Hannibal. "You were scared. For me," says Will, and there is a strange note of wonder in his voice.

The doctor allows the scrutiny, uncomfortable as it is. Over the past two days, he has examined his understanding of Will and formulated a hypothesis; he will need to mull it over before giving voice to it.

Then Will bows his head and says, "I should've texted you."

"You didn't know I was coming home."

The two stand a pace apart, and neither knows what to do to bridge the awkwardness between them. For a split second Hannibal thinks of their first meeting, Will in his many oversized layers of flannel and sturdy boots, shy but not cringing. The Will Graham before him now has filled out considerably, his hair thick with good health and proper care, and his skin positively glowing.

Astounding what a few weeks of proper tending can do.

"I'd like to go back to the stream tomorrow," Will says as he turns away. It breaks the ice.

"Not fishing, I hope," says Hannibal.

"No, not fishing." Will smiles. "We'll need to buy some sweet potatoes."

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Dinner is much less fraught with tension, for which Will is thankful. He listens to Dr Lecter talk about the "human totem pole" that they found. It should disturb Will that he finds it fascinating, but he is truly interested.

"Sounds like someone showing off his trophies," Will remarks.

Dr Lecter inclines his head. "I concur. They are trying to identify the people involved, but we're not certain what connection they have."

"You said totem pole," says Will. "I remember reading that the... thing at the top is usually the most important."

He practically inhales the sauteed kidneys with mustard and tarragon on brioche. He survived the past two days on sandwiches and omelettes, and the return to the wonderful cuisine Dr Lecter prepares reminds Will how much he owes the older man. There is a faint suspicion that Dr Lecter is trying to fatten him up, but Will has come to accept it. He won't deny finding it odd that the doctor likes using organ meat, but given how delicious the meat ends up, Will is willing to be converted.

"That is a fallacy, actually. The low man on the totem pole is the most significant..." Dr Lecter trails off. Then he bestows a grin on Will. "I think you may have solved the mystery, Will. Don't tell Dr Bloom that I told you about the totem pole; she is liable to be quite annoyed that I have inflicted potential trauma on you."

"My dad was murdered, I was attacked by the same cannibalistic murderer, and I killed a bad man less than a month ago. I'd say that is fairly tame material."

Dr Lecter touches Will's hand. The stitches have long been removed, and an ugly red scar runs across his palm. Will has been diligent in applying the vitamin E Dr Lecter insisted on, so the skin is healing fairly quickly.

"Are the nightmares still plaguing you?"

Will shakes his head. He doodles patterns in the sauce with his fork and admits, "I saw my dad today."

Dr Lecter tilts his head quizzically, but says nothing. It is a welcoming silence, one that Will recognizes as a tool Dr Lecter uses with devastating effectiveness, and he fills it with elaboration.

"Not really him, but... like a vision or, or an apparition. Not the way he used to be, either. There was blood at his, um, neck and along his belly," says Will. He sets down his utensils, aware that he has been very bad-mannered in fiddling with them. "We talked. Or, I talked with... with my projection of him. Um." The young man's breath catches for an instant. "I'm not... Am I going crazy?"

"I doubt it," says Dr Lecter lightly. "If you could bring these into the kitchen while I give Jack a call? We'll talk more about you seeing your father later, after the dishes are done."

*****

"You're not going crazy," Hannibal reassures Will afterwards in the study. They have settled on the rug in front of the fireplace, opting for a more casual approach. Will has taken a cushion from the sitting room and hugs it tightly, while Hannibal has the throw over his bare feet. He has little liking for the cold - one reason he chose to settle in Baltimore is the mild

weather. "A simple explanation is that you miss him, but I would also suggest that you seek to reconcile an internal dispute. Was it very vivid? "

"As though he was right there with me. We talked."

"What about?"

"Um..." Will's tongue licks over his lips. Hannibal tracks the minute movement with his eyes. "I said that, uh, that you are good. For me."

It's a good thing that Will is staring at something in the rug and not at him; Hannibal cannot help the pleased smile that graces his lips nor the softness of his gaze. "Does the way I treat you make you troubled?"

Will shakes his head. His curls are getting unruly, but Hannibal longs to weave his hands into the dark brown hair and feel the curls wind about his fingers.

"I like it," the teenager admits cautiously, his fingers digging into the cushion. "Being taken care of. It's nice, like dad on his good days. I'd almost forgotten."

Hannibal frowns faintly. "Do you think of me as a surrogate father?"

"No. You're... you're-" Will bites his upper lip, bringing a lovely flush of rose to the skin. "I can't see you as a father to me."

"Thank goodness," says Hannibal with a low chuckle. "I have no desire for children."

Will regards him curiously. "Never?"

"No. I am satisfied with my life as a bachelor," Hannibal says, and adds as a confession, "though there are times when solitude weighs heavy. I am glad you came into my life, Will, tragic though the circumstances have been."

Will does not reply, but he does smile bashfully at Hannibal. His lashes flutter as his gaze skates from the doctor's face down his covered legs and then away, his cheeks flushing pink.

The intimacy of the moment threatens.

Hannibal waits with bated breath, wondering if Will is going to press for more, and has to hold back a sigh when Will changes the topic to Hannibal's travels.

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It is late in the afternoon by the time they arrive. Will has managed to secure a bag of sweet potatoes from an Asian supermarket, and is trying not to ogle at Dr Lecter in his version of casual: a dark gray sweater over a pale blue shirt, and the same pair of jeans he offered Will when the young man first stayed over. The jeans appear to lengthen the doctor's legs and enhance the man's natural grace to something close to beauty.

"I only have the one pair," Dr Lecter pointed out that morning when he asked Will to 'lend' him that particular garment. "If we are going to be walking around in the woods, I'd rather I do it in something I'm unlikely to wear again."

"Well, it *is* yours in the first place." If Will dwelt a little too much on the fact that he and Dr Lecter shared the same piece of clothing, it is his own business.

Will has to hide his laugh at Dr Lecter's nonplussed face when the doctor is tasked to wrap the washed sweet potatoes in foil. Dr Lecter's hands are skillful, however, and has the tubers prepared by the time Will has set up the bricks around a leaf pile. The pebbly bank is a good location, away from the dry brush, and Will washes his hands in the cool water before striding up to the older man.

"Thanks," says Will.

"What, precisely, are you planning to do with these?" asks Dr Lecter. "I know you can grow sweet potatoes with oak leaves..."

"We roast them." Will passes a long, thick branch to the doctor and keeps one himself. He then tosses the foil wrapped goodies into the pile and starts the fire, and once the flames have quietened a little, pushes the foil-wrapped goodies in the smoldering parts. "That ought to do it."

Dr Lecter is curious. "When did you learn to do that?"

"Dad and I used to do this once the leaves fell. There's something very comforting about hot roasted sweet potatoes and the chill of fall. Not that it's all that cold yet but..." Will dusts off some leaf litter from his hands. "I guess I just want to, um, share something with you."

*****

The expressed sentiment stirs something sweet in Hannibal's gut.

"You have lived a life more full than half the people I've met," Hannibal tells him.

Will pokes at the fire and sits next to the doctor. "Can you tell me a bit about yours?"

Hannibal hesitates. There are things best left to the shadows of history. Still, perhaps he can give Will a part of himself.

"I was born in Lithuania," Hannibal says quietly, staring into the fire. "My parents died when I was very little, and my sister... my sister was even younger. She was... perfect. I lost her."

His voice catches. Will notices and shifts closer, wary and assuring, lending the comfort of his presence.

Hannibal manages to go on. "My uncle and aunt adopted me a few years after that, and from there I went to medical school and later the Johns Hopkins Medical Center. Since then I have lived here."

A rustle of fabric and dry leaves distract the psychiatrist from his thoughts. Will moves to kneel before him, heedless of the dirt that are going to stain his knees. His eyes are bright. He doesn't ask about Mischa, for which Hannibal is thankful; he fears what he might do should Will inquire after her.

"Grief never leaves you, does it?" Will says.

"No. Loss leaves a hole in the heart." Hannibal is transfixed by the tender understanding in the young man's face. "Some days you forget that it is there. Some days it is all you can focus on."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to bring up bad memories."

Hannibal stands and holds out a hand to help Will to his feet. "Let's go for a short walk."

"The fire?"

"We won't go far."

They head to the river and Hannibal shuts his eyes and lets his head loll back. The rushing currents fill his ears with white noise.

"When you're agitated," says Hannibal without looking at Will, "what do you think about?"

"You mean in the past? Um. I don't think I really thought."

Hannibal smiles. "Is this a place of calm for you, Will?"

"Yeah."

"How well can you recreate this place in your mind?"

"Pretty well," says Will. When Hannibal turns to look at him, the young man looks thoughtful. "I suppose I can step into the stream instead of, I dunno, trying to stab someone with a mirror shard if they start talking trash."

Hannibal chuckles. "That would be preferable, yes, but do not hesitate to defend yourself when necessary, Will." He wonders if he ought to train Will in basic throws and disarming techniques.

*****

Will feels penitent for asking Dr Lecter about his past. He peers around, checking on the leaf pile fire, and takes in the serenity of the location. While this is his and his dad's place, having Dr Lecter here has only made it more special.

"Hey, the moon is out," Will says artlessly, seeing the white orb hung ghost-like against the blue sky.

Dr Lecter looks up. "A full moon. The word 'lunacy' is derived from 'Luna', the assumption then being that mental illness is caused by fluctuations in the moon."

"I don't know about lunacy," says Will. "My dad's friend showed me something neat once about the moon."

"Oh?" Dr Lecter smiles at him. Will likes this particular smile: it shows mainly around the doctor's eyes and gentles the intensity of the burgundy gaze. "What is it?"

Will chews on his lower lip. He takes a deep breath and walks up to the doctor. "Um. It's a... I really want to thank you for giving me so many things. And I can never hope to repay all of it."

"You don't have to."

"No. But I'd like to. So I'm gonna start by giving you the moon."

*****

Now Will has piqued Hannibal's interest. This is evidently part of whatever Will intends to show, so the psychiatrist plays along. "And how are you to give me the moon, dear Will?"

At the endearment, Will blushes. He stands next to Hannibal, half his back against the older man, and raises his right hand, palm outwards. "Focus on my hand."

Hannibal nods. The gloves are worn and too thin; Hannibal will get him a better pair tomorrow.

"Wait, I can't do this with gloves." Will peels them off and sticks them into his jacket. "Um, let's start again."

"Focus on your hand," Hannibal supplies.

"Yeah, and, um. See where the moon is?"

The young man is almost as tall as Hannibal. From their angle it is about a finger's width above Will's hand. Hannibal nods, aware that Will can feel the movement. Will then shifts his hand higher and obscures the moon.

"Keep your eyes on my hand," says Will, and then closes it into a fist, jerking it to his chest. The motion means he turns to face Hannibal.

Hannibal obediently does not look up. "What do I do now?"

"Um, blow," Will murmurs.

The lack of understanding must have shown on Hannibal's face. Will put his mouth to the spiral of his thumb and index finger, and puffs into it. His cheeks are very pink as he offers his closed hand a second time.

Hannibal can't resist. It is a kiss exactly where Will just put his mouth earlier, and he blows. When Will takes his hand away, his face is bright red. The doctor is delighted; this is not an innocent gesture, and when Will glances at him and averts his sweet blue eyes, Hannibal is even more elated.

"If I were younger and less mature, I'd be making a very crass joke right about now," he says in a low voice.

"You're not that old," Will retorts. He swallows visibly and then opens his palm. In it is a white pebble. "So, um. The moon."

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Dr Lecter peers at him for so long that Will begins to feel nervous. He quickly closes his hand over the pebble he picked up earlier, but the doctor takes hold of his wrist with snake speed.

"Thank you, Will, I shall treasure this always," says Dr Lecter.

"It's only a pebble," Will mutters. His face feels hot. What was he thinking? He turns aside, wishing he can blame this on the full moon, except he knows what he is doing. "Um, I didn't mean to, uh, I just... God. I'm sorry. I know I'm just a kid to you."

"You are definitely not just a kid to me." Dr Lecter grasps Will's chin and makes him look into his eyes. The doctor is somber but not censorious. Will nearly reels from the potency of Dr Lecter's gaze. Perhaps sensing that he is overwhelming Will, Dr Lecter lets go of the teen. "But I am too old."

"You're not-" Will grabs the doctor's sweater and that touch somehow keeps him from moving away. "You're not too old."

"Will-"

Before his courage can desert him, Will steps closer to Dr Lecter and leans in. His fingers curl into the warm fabric of the doctor's sweater and he thinks he may have stopped breathing. It feels like a heartbeat and an eternity before he closes the distance between his and Dr Lecter's mouths.

*****

Hannibal jolts from the sheer shock of it. The sudden motion ends the kiss. Will looks stunned, and then shame creeps into his blue-gray eyes. As he is about to pull away, Hannibal cups Will's face and then kisses him again, slow and sweet.

The young man is evidently new to this, and Hannibal takes care not to push too hard. He keeps the kiss gentle, pressing his lips to Will's tenderly, lingering over the soft plushness. Will whimpers and pushes closer, his lips parting on an quick inhalation. His tongue darts out to taste Hannibal's lips, and teases its way into the psychiatrist's mouth.

Hannibal groans and slides his arms around Will's trim waist, wanting to devour Will's innocence until the young man is a writhing mess beneath him. Still, Will tastes divine, clumsy and unskilled as he is with too much enthusiasm and teeth.

It is with great reluctance that Hannibal pulls away. They are both breathless and mussed, their cheeks high with color. Hannibal carefully disengages, though he squeezes Will's left hand with his right. His body is thrumming with desire. However, he knows it is far better to let Will dictate the pace, and thus grow a stronger bond.

"I think," he says, his tone brimming with private joy, "the sweet potatoes are ready."

Chapter End Notes

I did tag it as slow-burn, but here's their first kiss.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal glances at Will in the seat beside him, at their hands laced together and resting on Will's left thigh, and has to force himself to focus on the road.

"I don't suppose you'll need dinner," he says when they get home.

Will smiles. "I'm stuffed."

They don't hold hands as they leave the car and head to the house, and keep a distance of two paces apart when they ascend the narrow stairs to the bedrooms. The space between them cries out to be filled, but Hannibal keeps himself in check. No need to give the neighbors cause to talk yet.

Only when they get to Will's door does Hannibal pause. He turns and kisses Will again, breathing him in, branding the sensation of soft chapped lips against his own into every cell of his being. Will moans and his hands reach up to grasp Hannibal's arms with something close to desperation. They sag against Will's door and again Hannibal has to call on his reserves of patience and self-restraint to pull back.

"Go shower," he murmurs against Will's kiss-swollen mouth. Will looks dazed as he nods, but he does not move away. Hannibal laughs softly and physically pushes Will lightly into his bedroom. "I'll see you in the study after we both clean up."

*****

Will is deliriously happy as he shucks out of his clothes. His entire being is buzzing, like he has taken too much sugar or caffeine; he attributes it to the memory of Dr Lec - no, *Hannibal,* Will corrects giddily, it's Hannibal now - Hannibal's lips on his, the taste of the older man faint and all-conquering. Will is unused to touch, and now he can't wait to run his hands over the doctor, trace the lines of the veins in those clever hands, map out the bone structure of the hauntingly sculpted face.

"God, I'm obsessed," he breathes, half-hard just from his thoughts. "Calm your hormones down, Graham."

The spray of warm water eases the desire somewhat, until he starts washing his hair and then he realizes it's exactly how Hannibal's hair smells, that he has been using the same type of shampoo and very likely the same soap. No wonder he feels safe with Hannibal. The thought sends his mind to the older man who is now taking his own shower, and Will fails to stop his imagination from picturing the doctor wet and naked, his strong and brilliant hands scrubbing into ashy blond hair-

"Fuck." Will grits his jaw and rinses off the suds. His left arm braces him against the tiled wall while his right wraps around his erection. Cursing and thanking his vivid imagination simultaneously, he starts stroking himself, eyes shut to picture how Hannibal would touch him.

*****

The water is slightly hotter than he usually enjoys it, but he can't complain right now. Hannibal leans against the wall and a sigh escapes him. His hand strokes slowly, lightly; he imagines Will, bashful but aroused, moist lips parted against Hannibal's mouth.

He'll be tentative at first, Hannibal thinks, his hand imitating his thought, *and then increasingly bold, losing himself to the moment...*

*****

"H-hannibal, god, fuck," Will gasps, practically *feeling* a sturdy body behind him, trapping him against the wall, a larger, more skilled hand around his own, setting the pace, leading Will to the brink. "Hann-"

He bites his lip and whimpers as he comes, semen falling on the tile. He inhales shakily, water over his back, and it is a few moments before he takes the detachable shower head to rinse the wall clean.

*****

Hannibal chokes out Will's name and his entire body tenses as he climaxes, spilling into his fist. Ejaculate and water sluices down his legs and he blinks open his eyes with a shuddering breath. He finishes his shower with alacrity.

At least the tension is relieved from his body. He does not want to rush this, much as he wants Will in his bed. It's too new yet. Hannibal is under no illusion that, once this development is made known, they are going to receive any blessings. It is an uphill challenge ahead. A love made public rarely lasts, as Capellanus advised so long ago, and Hannibal intends to keep them under wraps for the time being, even while he wants to stake his claim and make it known to the world that Will Graham is *his*.

Will wants him. Will *chose* him.

The idea is staggering. Hannibal pulls on a cream pullover and his sleeping pants, and then throws on a robe as an afterthought. Something precipitated Will to approach Hannibal. The imagined conversation with his father? Or has seeing Abigail Hobbs triggered the decision?

He pads down to the study and is surprised that Will is not there yet. A smirk curls his lips. Perhaps Will surrendered to the same urges as Hannibal did earlier. Merely picturing it sends a shaft of heat through Hannibal's body. It is frightening, on some level. Ever since he regained his speech, he has learned to control every aspect of his self. Will Graham however manages to pull at the seams, and sooner or later Hannibal's person suit will be undone.

When that happens, what will Will Graham do?

As if summoned, Will enters the room noiselessly. He looks scrubbed, though his curls are messy and hang in his eyes. Hannibal extends a hand and welcomes the young man's hesitant grip.

"Hey there," says Hannibal quietly.

"Hey yourself," Will replies, and his small smile nestles into a nook inside Hannibal's memory palace. At this rate, the psychiatrist will need to build a brand new wing for Will, something that he now looks forward to. Will is dressed in the red pullover again and a pair of sweatpants. He looks cuddly and edible. The young man plays with Hannibal's fingers, shy and bold at the same time. "What are we gonna do now?"

"I think I will kiss you a lot more." Hannibal grins at the laugh that burbled from Will's throat. "And we will also look over your understanding of calculus."

"Calculus? Now?" The look of dismay is absolutely precious.

Hannibal nuzzles Will's temple, still reveling in his freedom to glut himself with sensory input. "No, we're looking over how much you know. We'll start working on the topic tomorrow."

Will actually pouts and Hannibal leans in to nip at the tempting lower lip. The two linger over the kiss, slow and teasing. Hannibal thinks he will never get enough of the young man's sweetness. He smiles against Will's mouth and whispers, "Calculus, my dear Will."

"Fine. And then kissing."

*****

*****

Will hums *It's a Wonderful World* to himself as he checks on the vegetables in the small kitchen garden. He can't stop smiling, even though it has been eight days since he kissed Hannibal. Since they started kissing. Since *this* started. He can't bring himself to call the doctor his boyfriend - it sounds so juvenile. But he takes great glee in counting the days.

Every morning, when he goes down to the kitchen, they greet each other with a slow kiss that sends tingles running over Will's spine that wakes him up much better than the coffee; every night, after Hannibal goes over his lessons, they curl up together on the chaise longue or on the rug before the fireplace.

He knows Hannibal has been very accommodating to his inexperience. They have yet to progress past kissing and very light petting - Will's face grows hot at the recollections - but Will isn't really ready for more. His own touches have been mostly exploratory, trailing over Hannibal's chest and arms. The older man is very patient, allowing Will to set the pace.

It is his first relationship, and he's not so naive to think that there aren't going to be problems. Sometime soon, they will have to discuss what they have between them. Not yet

though. Will wants to bask in the glow for now.

Hannibal has only two appointments today, and he'll be done at three. A quick check tells Will it's already gone one-thirty in the afternoon, and he has to pick up the dry cleaning. He quickly puts away the vegetables and sends a text to Hannibal.

I'm going to pick up your suits. Is there anything else you need?

The response comes just after Will has pulled on his boots and is shrugging into his coat.

Come over after you've picked them up. My last appointment should be done early.

Will practically beams. There's a domesticity to their whole arrangement that appeals to the teenager. He should worry how much he enjoys the lack of interaction with people other than Hannibal, but he can't find it in himself to give a fuck. Maybe when he feels more stable, he'll broach the subject with Hannibal.

Right now he feels full of light and warmth. Now that he's away from the system and has learned something about managing his temper, Will recognizes that his perpetual run-ins with his schoolmates were partly his fault. He knows he has issues and for the most part of his life, he hasn't wanted to deal with them.

He doesn't want his issues to jeopardize whatever he has with Hannibal. It's the best thing he's ever had in his life, and for once he wants to be selfish enough to hoard it forever.

*****

Hannibal listens with faux attentiveness as Mrs Juliette Baudin complains about her husband's continued infidelity. She is crying, as usual, but Hannibal waits for her to stop. She only cries long enough to be perceived as a heartbroken wife. It will work on other people - she is a petite blond with a sweet voice, and an actress *par excellence*. Hannibal is keenly aware that she is only waiting for a reason to ruin her philandering husband's life. Thus far, Mr Baudin has very careful.

"It is your decision, Juliette, to stay with him," says Hannibal. "Why do you feel that you can't leave him?"

Juliette blows her nose delicately. "He is a good man."

"Is he now?" Hannibal asks lightly. "Is he truly a good man, or do you wish to be seen as the good wife?"

There is a spark behind Juliette's eyes. "I *am* a good wife," she insists.

"Then you must take action to show your husband that you are truly good for him. Some men need reminding what they stand to lose." Hannibal does not need to look at his watch to know it is time. He smiles faintly and inclines his head. "You know what he stands to lose, Mrs Baudin. You see it in the mirror every day."

Juliette dabs at her eyes. "*Merci*, Dr Lecter. I keep thinking what it means if I chose to leave him, but I should think of myself."

He sees her out. Their next appointment, Hannibal thinks, will be spent discussing a divorce and how to manage the press - to Juliette's advantage, of course. Her husband's affair is with a secretary, which is utterly banal, but the damage to his reputation will be interesting.

While he is straightening out his desk, he hears a timid knock on his door. Hannibal brightens and hurries to open it.

"Hey there," says Will, four suits in their hangers over a shoulder.

"Hey yourself," says Hannibal. The casual American-ness makes Will grin.

The greetings have become a shorthand between them after that first evening spent in the study. Hannibal recalls how snugly Will fit against him on the chaise longue, and how short the evening seemed. He closes the door and takes the suits, hanging them from the coat hook, before he leans in for a kiss. It is still marvelously new. Will's lack of experience means that he is willing to explore and experiment, and thus far Will loves every type of kiss Hannibal has lavished on him.

The young man is pliant and warm, his hands braced on Hannibal's shoulders, and his mouth tasting vaguely of tomatoes. Hannibal's tongue rubs over the roof of Will's mouth before he pulls away.

Will is mussed up again and the tops of his cheeks are a soft shade of rose. "Hey there," he repeats quietly, and smiles.

Hannibal rubs his hand over Will's face and pecks another kiss on plush lips. "I like seeing you at the end of the working day. It is balm for the weary soul."

"Me too. And in the mornings." Will's gaze darts aside, as though afraid he's said too much. "Let's go home."

"Not yet," says Hannibal. "We have another appointment."

"We do?"

*****

It turns out that Hannibal has arranged for Will to meet Mrs Komeda at her place.

"I wish I'd known," Will frets. "I'd have worn something more... I dunno. Appropriate."

Hannibal smiles at him. "You look perfect."

"I'd say you're biased," Will retorts, but he can't help the fluttering in his gut. He plays with a button on his coat. "What's Mrs Komeda like?"

"A wonderfully frank person," says Hannibal, "and a fervent supporter of the arts. You'd like her."

"I'm more worried about if she'll like *me*. She's your friend, right?"

"I like you, so she will." The confidence with which Hannibal makes the statement bolsters Will.

Mrs Komeda's place is a *mansion*. It is surrounded by trees and Will feels more and more nervous as Hannibal drives up to the door. Will half-expects servants and a few cars and maybe even horses; he thought Hannibal's house was a mansion, but compared to this it is positively modest. He suddenly feels extremely underdressed, and wonders if they will be met by a butler.

Instead, they are greeted at the door by Mrs Komeda herself. She is a slender woman with dark hair, and was in a simple green dress. If Will were to pass her on the street, he would never have guess she lived in such luxury. "Hannibal! It was such a surprise to receive your call. And this must be your Will Graham," she says with a pleasant smile.

'*Your Will Graham*.' *That has a nice sound to it.* Will blushes. "Good evening, ma'am."

"Oh, dear boy, Mrs Komeda will do," she says, and ushers them in. "Hannibal, where have you been hiding your charming young friend? He is absolutely precious. I do hope you are staying for dinner. Perla, prepare some drinks for our guests."

A servant who has been unobtrusively waiting behind the door nodded and walked away gracefully; she has to be Perla. Mrs Komeda leads them all the way into a formal ball room. The chandelier overhead seems like something out of a fairytale, and Will gapes at it until he sees the piano. Then his breath is taken away.

The promised Blüthner baby grand is a vision of elegance in polished ebony. Will approaches it as though the instrument might dissipate into smoke; his gaze never leaves the piano. He reaches out with his right hand, but draws it back before he makes contact.

"Do try it out, Will." Mrs Komeda waves a languid hand at it. "I've just had it tuned. It's only a baby grand, too small for this space, but my daughter Linn insisted on this one. No one has played it since she moved to Australia a few months ago."

*****

Hannibal can't help smiling tenderly when Will touches the instrument with the same sort of reverence as a pilgrim might approach the Pope. The expression does not go unnoticed, but Mrs Komeda says nothing until Will has lifted the cover and taken a seat.

"Can I really play this?" Will's fingers hover over the keyboard. His face is beseeching, and it will take a heart of stone to deny the young man the opportunity.

"Of course. Practice your octave and chord runs to warm up, but don't overstretch the right hand," says Hannibal, stepping close to Will and gently pushing his fingers to the keys. Will

shivers and his breath actually catches. Hannibal wants to kiss him for that. Then again, Hannibal wants to kiss Will for everything he does. "Mrs Komeda and I will be nearby."

"We'll be right next door having a chat, dear boy, you just enjoy your practicing," says Mrs Komeda.

Hannibal follows his host to a sitting room nearby, where a tray of snacks have been placed.

Mrs Komeda nods at Perla and dismisses her. "Tea or wine?"

"Tea, please. I have to drive later," says Hannibal. "Thank you for allowing Will the chance to play on your daughter's piano."

"Oh, there's no need to stand on ceremony," says Mrs Komeda, pouring tea for the doctor and herself. "You've been such a gracious host so often that it's only right I do the same. I do miss your dinner parties, Hannibal, and we have missed you at the opera. But I suppose you've had other matters on your mind."

Before Hannibal can reply, they hear the tentative beginnings of scales played next door, and then a slow octave run that sped up, which soon flowed into chord runs that became increasingly smoother after a few false starts. Will then continues onto Hanon exercises; the drills are familiar to Hannibal, but hearing Will play even the routine exercises gives the dullness added shine.

"He is quite darling," says Mrs Komeda, rousing Hannibal from his reverie. "He has been the reason for your absence, I take it."

Hannibal sips his tea. "Yes. His father passed recently and I have offered to take him in."

"Mm. You make a lovely couple."

Hannibal coughs, for once caught off-guard. "We are- Mrs Komeda, that is-"

Mrs Komeda hands over a napkin for the doctor. "Relax. I do mean what I say. The way the boy looks at you - he probably thinks you hung the moon and painted the stars."

Thinking of the white pebble that now sits on his bedside table in a velvet box, Hannibal smiles and lowers his gaze. "He is remarkably grounded, actually."

"He's what, eighteen?"

"Seventeen." The psychiatrist becomes somber. "I anticipate much... speculation in the near future."

"Ignore those gossips. Seventeen *is* legal," says Mrs Komeda airily. She leans in and smirks wickedly. "In fact, grab the bull by its horns. Show him off properly and stake your claim. There will be a production of Tristan and Isolde in two weeks' time, plenty of time for you to have him prettied up with a tuxedo. I bet you anything that they will only fawn over him."

Hannibal blinks and considers the idea. He does enjoy Mrs Komeda's company. Beneath her veneer of wealth and social graces is an anarchist who wants to unsettle those content with their lives. It is a shame he can't be too forthcoming over the ingredients of his table. She is likely one who won't feel appalled.

"It is not so much the legality that is the issue, but our ages," he says at last. "I am twenty-four years older than he."

"My late husband was thirty-five years older than I was," Mrs Komeda counters, adding, "and Johann is seventeen years younger than I am. Age means little when there is chemistry, though in my case I will have to dump my lover soon. He does look good in a suit, but can barely hold a proper conversation. Yours seem rather demure."

"He has a sharp mind," Hannibal tells her. "For someone so young, he has astonishing insights when we have our discussions. I am humbled to have been chosen by him."

Mrs Komeda laughs. "You are never humble, my dear Hannibal, but I'm intrigued if you hold him in such high regard."

In the next room, Will launches into Mendelssohn's Fantasy in F sharp minor, Op. 28.

*****

He has always loved the melancholy tone of the opening, and relishes the technical fun of the flamboyant arpeggios in the first movement. His fingers dance over the keys, mere vehicles for his memory. It is exhilarating exercise on an exquisite instrument, the clear. bell-like sound so unlike any he has heard. The baby grand in Chordophone was a Steinway, loud and precise, but Will never liked its impersonal feel. The Blüthner on the other hand is not as simple to get the hang of, but the tone is full of character, almost dreamlike.

He has just completed the third movement and is segueing into Schumann's Arabeske in C. major, Op.18, when a tall young man with dark blond hair strolls in. "Auntie, you never said you play the piano - oh. Hi. You're new."

Will freezes and his hands immediately drop to his lap. He doesn't quite know what would be the appropriate response. He settles for a shy nod. "Hello."

"Don't stop on my account." The other youth ambles up to him and smiles broadly. "I'm Mikolaj Sowada, but feel free to call me Miko. You are?"

"Um. Will. Will Graham."

"You play wonderfully." Mikolaj looks around. "Have you seen my auntie? I want to borrow her car."

Will jolts to his feet, nearly toppling the bench, but Mikolaj manages to catch it. Mortified, Will points at the door Hannibal and Mrs Komeda went through earlier, and edges away from the other young man.

Mikolaj lowers his tone. "Hey. It's okay, I don't bite."

"I, um. I-I should... I think I should go. Find. Um." Will wishes he can relax. He quickly sidles past Mikolaj to get to Hannibal, feeling terribly out of his depth.

*****

Mrs Komeda and Hannibal are in the midst of sharing a story when Will comes to them. Hannibal takes in the nervous clench of Will's jaw and his darting gaze, before he sees the blond young man walking over to them.

"Miko, did you frighten our guest?" Mrs Komeda scolds in good humor. "Come here. Hannibal, this is my nephew Mikolaj Sowada. Miko, greet Dr Hannibal Lecter."

"Good afternoon, Dr Lecter," says the young man. "I didn't mean to scare him, Auntie, I thought it was you playing that wonderful piece of music."

Will has ducked behind Hannibal somewhat while Mrs Komeda converses with her nephew. The psychiatrist studies Mikolaj, and senses no threat. "Will? Take a seat and rest your hands. I want to check that you haven't overstretched. Mikolaj, would you like to join us?"

"Thanks, Dr Lecter, but I gotta go downtown. Auntie, may I use the Jag?"

"No, you are to use the Porsche. The Jaguar is too new for you to wreck."

"Thanks." Mikolaj shakes his head at his aunt's parsimony. "See you around, Will. Hope I can hear you play again."

Will ducks his head again, but manages a half-smile. "Bye."

When Mikolaj is out of hearing, Mrs Komeda says, "That boy has to find something to do soon. My brother insisted on his having a gap year, and thus far he has found that he loves driving and movies."

"Young people take time to find themselves," says Hannibal. "Perhaps his future is in the silver screen. Will, your right hand."

Will offers it without comment. The scar is sore and bleeding slightly on the edges. Displeased, Hannibal purses his lips, but only dabs away the blood with his own pocket square. Mrs Komeda is distressed by the wound as well, but she does not inquire as to why Will has the injury.

"More haste, less speed," Hannibal reminds Will. He turns to their host. "Thank you for the use of your piano, Mrs Komeda."

"Come back anytime, Will," says the slender woman with a gracious smile. She pours him a cup of tea and waits until the young man has finished it. "It is so lovely to have music played in the house again. Why don't you come by when Hannibal is at his practice? Perla will see to it you have everything you need, and I'm sure Mikolaj won't mind playing chauffeur if he gets to drive the Jaguar."

The offer seems to light a candle inside the young man. Will looks at Mrs Komeda and then at Hannibal. He seems entirely unaware that he touches Hannibal's knee when he asks, "Can I?"

Hannibal pushes a stray tendril back from Will's forehead. "Of course."

Will suddenly seems aware of their intimacy and shrinks back, his teeth worrying at his lower lip.

Mrs Komeda laughs. "Calm down, Will. I won't blab about this. Not yet, anyway. I'm sure Hannibal will find a suitable occasion to show that he's taken off the market. You have not idea, Will Graham, how many socialites' hearts you are about to break."

"I... we aren't, um." Will glances at the doctor and takes in Hannibal's suppressed mirth. "Oh. You know." He deflates and picks at his hands. "I... You don't seem too... I dunno."

"Judgmental?" Mrs Komeda's tone is very gentle. "I've seen and heard of worse things than people falling in love, darling. Hannibal is a jewel, and if he has chosen this, then I am nothing but pleased for both of you. I look forward to your coming-out party, Hannibal, and that had better be a dinner party."

*****

"I like her," Will blurts out on the drive home.

Hannibal glances over. "That is good. I like her too."

"So... you're okay if I go over a couple times a week to practice?"

Hannibal nods and changes lanes. "I think you should go over every day to practice. You need contact with other people, Will. That is only healthy. Since you profess not to have friends in school, this may be a good chance. Mrs Komeda will not begrudge you your visits."

"I am rusty on the keys," Will quietly admits. Then he touches Hannibal's hand shyly. "I appreciate this." He fidgets with his sleeves. While it is endearing, Hannibal thinks he ought to break him of that nervous tic. Will then says hesitantly, "I think... I think Mikolaj is all right."

"He is a fine young man if he is anything like his aunt." Hannibal feels a stirring of jealousy and squashes it. This is for Will's good. "As your unofficial therapist, I will also recommend that you try to befriend Mikolaj. He is near your age, for one thing, and he appears quite sensible."

He does not react when Will slides his hand over Hannibal's right hand.

"Thanks. For this." Will pauses, and adds, "For everything."

*****

*****

Bedelia Du Maurier is eerily calm, even after Hannibal confides that he is in a relationship with Will. Her sole reaction is to tilt her head slightly to the right.

"Do you harbor doubts about Will's motivations?" she asks, cutting directly to the heart of the matter.

Hannibal appreciates the candor. He isn't certain why he has told Bedelia about the relationship. Perhaps he wants to prove that he isn't a creature in a person suit. Maybe he wants to gauge her as a psychiatrist and as a person.

"You know I have been providing for him."

"You think this may be a case of misplaced gratitude."

"I hope not," says Hannibal honestly, "but I fear the possibility."

She blinks once, slowly, as though recalibrating her understanding of Hannibal in her head. There is a ghost of a smile in her eyes. "How would you feel if it was?"

Hannibal considers and narrows his eyes. "All that I have ever valued will be ash and dust."

"You are obsessed with him," she points out, not unkindly.

"I am in love."

"Obsessively so." She smooths down her skirt and observes Hannibal for a very long moment. Hannibal holds her gaze, trusting in his control. Bedelia finally says, "The only way through is forward, Hannibal. I cannot tell you more than that. But take care that your obsession does not overwhelm the boy."

Hannibal allows a small inclination of his head. "Will is resilient."

"The most resilient willow may still break with too strong a storm. I am happy that you have found someone to love," her slight emphasis on the last word indicates her doubts on that matter, "and I do hope he accepts and loves *all* of you, Hannibal."

*****

*****

On Tuesday, instead of Will picking up the dry cleaning, Hannibal has him come by his office and then drives them down to Hannibal's tailor. Will realizes belatedly that the doctor intends to get him measured for a tuxedo.

"I really don't need one," says Will haplessly, but Hannibal just propels him up the narrow stairs with a touch to the small of his back. It opens into a well-lit loft with a skylight, and two dapper gentlemen discussing something over a shirt.

The plump one notices their arrival. "Ah! Dr Lecter. You are early. And this is the young man who needs to be fitted?"

"Yes. Semi-formal for the evening. Signore Lozio, Signore Mediati, this is Will Graham. Will, this is Signore Lozio, my tailor, and his partner, Signore Mediati." Hannibal allows Will to be escorted by Signore Lozio onto a stand before a three-way mirror to be measured.

Will feels as though he is walking a tight-rope over the Grand Canyon. "Hannibal, why do I need to be - um, that tickles - why are we here?"

"You will need a suit for Mrs Komeda's benefit," says Hannibal placidly. "Also, I would love it if you could accompany me to an opera. Which reminds me - he needs something for the opera."

"I haven't agreed to going yet."

"But in the future you may wish to attend with me," says Hannibal. There is amusement playing around his maroon eyes. "I would prefer to be prepared."

Will knows he has little chance of fighting this. The measurements are taken quickly, Signore Lozio murmuring to himself in rapid Italian, while Signore Mediati talks to Hannibal and shows him fabric samples.

"Good bones, terrible posture," Signore Lozio says, taking some measurements at Will's shoulders. "No, don't straighten, you are not going to be marching. Unless you are marching. When will you be wearing this suit and what will you be doing?"

"Um, at a benefit concert. I'm playing the piano."

"Ah. Then we will make adjustments for that. Less restrictive around the shoulder and sleeves, and fluid lines that accentuate your back when you play. What details would you like to have?"

Will flushes uneasily. "I, uh, I'm not sure. I've never - this is my first suit."

Signore Lozio beams kindly, his round face wrinkling in a paternal manner. "No worries, Mr Graham. Come with me, we will look at some pictures, and you can then tell me what you like. I will be cutting your suit though Mediati and the other tailors will be doing the needlework; my eyes are not as good as they used to be."

*****

Hannibal watches as Will is patiently walked through the process by Lozio. He has decided on two suits in addition to the tuxedo that Will would need. Mediati has recommended a charcoal grey, and Hannibal now places an order for a navy blue plaid that is a touch more casual and would bring out his Will's lovely eyes.

"He will look splendid in Neapolitan tailoring," says Mediati, admiring Will's lean lines as Lozio holds shirts up for the young man to choose. "Not too polished."

Wabi-sabi.The art of imperfection, Hannibal's mind supplies in a cool female voice. It is achingly familiar, and he lets it fade into silence. He sees what Mediati means. Will's dark chocolate curls and slender build will help him carry off the nonchalant Neapolitan style easily, and the fact that it is not overly put together and coiffed as Hannibal's own preferred style of dress.

They make arrangements for the next three fittings for the formal suits, while the tuxedo will have to be made-to-measure. Lozio grumbles good-naturedly about the rush. However, since Hannibal is a long-time customer in excellent standing, he does not complain too vehemently.

Will is a little too overwhelmed to take note of what is going on, and when they exit Will almost melts with relief.

"I don't ever want to do that again," he says resolutely.

Hannibal smiles and guides him down the street to purchase appropriate footwear. "You may need new measurements the next time you get a suit."

"That one formal suit should see me through most things."

"You will also have a business suit for scholarship interviews." Off Will's incredulous look, Hannibal says, "You're intelligent enough for university, William Graham. I suspect you'd rather pay your own way than allow me to pay for you, therefore I would rather groom you towards securing a scholarship."

"But the suits are expensive, aren't they?"

"I can purchase a few less for myself." Hannibal sighs and regards Will with affectionate exasperation. "Will, I wish to purchase these for you. Indulge me."

Will worries at his lower lip with his incisors and then flushes. "All right."

"And now you will indulge me by choosing proper shoes to go with your suits," Hannibal continues smoothly, steering Will into the shop. Once Will is trapped with the salesperson, Hannibal exits and crosses the street, striding purposefully into an alley.

Freddie Lounds clutches her camera behind her and smiles, her shrewd eyes scanning the alleyway's entrance. "Dr Lecter. I didn't think you were paying attention to anyone other than Will Graham."

"Ms Lounds," says Hannibal coolly, "I will now politely ask you to delete those photos."

The redhead smirks impudently at him. "Public space, Dr Lecter. You'll have to do better to convince me."

Hannibal smiles and takes one step closer. "Would you like me to convince you?"

Freddie Lounds has not run Tattle Crime for so long without survival instinct. Hannibal gives her credit for being savvy enough to recognize that she has overstepped a line in Hannibal's book - though there are still many transgressions that Hannibal has yet to settle with her - and

she starts deleting the photos. Hannibal gestures for the camera and checks that the pictures are indeed gone before returning the equipment.

"I could write about you threatening me," Lounds says when Hannibal turns to leave.

"You could, but you won't." The psychiatrist allows a faint, supercilious smile at the self-proclaimed journalist's empty threat. "I'm far more interesting as an FBI consultant, Ms Lounds. Take me out of the picture, and what will you write about?"

Chapter End Notes

more kisses just because :3
thank you all for your comments and kudos, it means a lot!
also here is the Blüthner baby grand
Fantasie in F-sharp minor, Op. 28
Arabeske in C. major, Op.18

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"You don't have to wait, Miko, I have a bus from here," says Will with a small smile. He has become more comfortable around Mikolaj now that he has gone to Mrs Komeda's for the past three weeks to practice on her piano since their first meeting. Hannibal usually drives him there in the morning before he goes to his practice, and Mikolaj drops him off before noon, enough time for Will to complete his chores.

Today Hannibal has asked him to pick up a few items from the farmer's market, so it is where Mikolaj lets him alight. The blond young man has decided to join him too, which surprises Will.

Mikolaj shrugs. "Not like I have much to do. Besides, you're interesting."

"Um. I'm not, not really." Will looks away, digging out his phone for the shopping list Hannibal texted him earlier.

"Yes you are." Mikolaj falls into step beside him easily. Will wishes he has the same sort of confidence as Mikolaj; the older youth inhabits his skin with a comfort in a manner Will can only pray for. It's different from Hannibal's sleek, cat-like grace. Mikolaj studies Will with dark brown eyes. "I don't mean to pry, but why aren't you at school?"

Will grimaces. "I, um. I left. One fight too many."

"You're fucking kidding me," exclaims Mikolaj. "Were the fuckers punished?"

"I dunno. I mean, it's kind of my fault. I'm not good with people, so, um. They're not good with me either."

"Mm. Well, you're great with the piano. What are you getting anyway?"

Will enjoys Mikolaj's company in the way he enjoys a breeze on a summer day. He is artless and honest, and he doesn't mind that Will contributes little to their conversation and avoids eye contact. Somehow, Will has the notion that Mikolaj has adopted him as a kind of younger brother, and it is rather nice. Mikolaj listens to music that's a little too loud and angry, and he talks about movies a lot, mostly European ones that Will has never heard of, without expecting Will to do more than pay attention.

"Pumpkin and squash, mainly. Maybe Han- Um. Maybe Dr Lecter is going to try a festive recipe for Halloween."

"Is Dr Lecter your stepfather?"

"No." Will licks his lower lip. "I'm, uh, I'm his personal assistant. Kind of. I stay at his place and run his errands."

Mikolaj hums. "No school, huh. What about college?"

"I'm homeschooling. He sets me lessons, so when I get back after this, I'll be doing some calculus problems and analyzing a Shakespearean sonnet." Will smiles at the Mikolaj's frown. "Something wrong?"

"Maths is not my thing," admits the older youth. "But I suppose there can be beauty in it." He then goes on to talk about a movie called *A Beautiful MInd* , apparently a fictionalized biography of a Nobel Prize-winning mathematician, while Will picks out two pumpkins and three butternut squashes.

"It sounds interesting," Will offers sincerely when Mikolaj is done.

Mikolaj grins. "You know what? Let's get back to Auntie's, I'll pass you the movie and then I'll drive you home. It's got a pretty good story structure, even if the whole schizo shtick is kinda overdone. Tell me what you think of it the next time we meet."

*****

When he gets home, Hannibal finds Will stretched out on the rug with the laptop playing a movie. His assignments are stacked neatly on the desk.

"Hey there," says Hannibal, setting aside a folder that Jack gave him earlier. Some families have been killed during their meals, and Jack wants a profile on the killer. It's dull work, but there are dead kids, and Hannibal loathes murderers who target children. There are standards, after all.

Will perks up when he sees Hannibal. He pauses the movie and practically bounds over to the doctor to kiss him on the corners of his mouth. Nearly a month into their almost-secret relationship, Will has become more demonstrative, and much more comfortable with light petting. They have yet to have sex, however. Hannibal both curses and congratulates his rigid control, but he knows he's able to wait until Will gives of himself fully and freely.

"Hey yourself," Will says, bright-eyed.

"You look cheerful."

"Mikolaj lent me a movie. I like it." Will holds up a DVD case. "It's about John Nash."

Something ugly uncurls in the pit of Hannibal's stomach. He ignores it and says, "I bought you new gloves."

"Why?" Will is genuinely perplexed. "Mine are perfectly serviceable."

"They're too thin and too old."

Will sets his jaw. "They're fine, Hannibal. Thanks, but I don't need new ones. Can't you return them?"

A shadow passes before Hannibal's eyes. "I won't return them, Will, they're meant for you."

"It's nice of you, but I really don't need them and I won't wear them."

"I've already got them for you, Will. Take them."

"No," says Will, and pulls away. "You can't keep buying me things like this, Hannibal. Not when I don't need them."

"You do need better gloves."

"That's what you think, but I don't." Will wraps his arms about his middle again and goes to the laptop. "The squashes and pumpkins are in the kitchen."

Hannibal feels as though the air has been punched out of his body. He sweeps out of the study with the folder, and shuts the door behind him with a little more vigor than necessary.

Neither converses with the other for the rest of the evening, and Will retreats to his bedroom immediately afterwards. Hannibal spends his evening going over the contents of the folder in meticulous and icy detail. This is the first time since Will gave him the moon that they have not said good night to each other, and Hannibal has to resist the urge to go through his Rolodex.

*****

"Where are my gloves?" Will demands the next morning.

Hannibal barely looks up from the tablet when he pushes the cashmere-lined elk leather gloves across the counter. "Here."

"Not these. You know which ones," the younger man snaps. "Where are they, Hannibal?"

"I threw them out last night." Hannibal does look up now, expecting an annoyed glare or perhaps a resigned huff.

Instead he's faced with Will's devastation.

The starkness of his expression shakes Hannibal to the core. Before he can process why Will looks so shocked, the young man has dashed out of the kitchen and as Hannibal puts aside the tablet, he hears the sound of the main door slamming.

*****

Will practically yanks off the lid of the trash receptacle on the sidewalk, praying that Hannibal's timing is off, that the sanitation company has not been by yet.

It is empty.

Refusing to believe what his eyes are telling him, Will goes to their neighbors, opening every single one of them. With every one his heart sinks further. He is onto his fourth when he's caught by Hannibal.

"What are you doing?" the older man demands.

"Where did you throw them?" Will whispers harshly. His glare meets Hannibal's eyes directly. *" Where did you throw them, Hannibal?* "

*****

"They're gone by now," says the doctor. He tries to wrap Will in his coat - the young man has dashed out in only a tee shirt and jeans, still barefoot - but Will wants none of it. He shoves Hannibal's hands off from his shoulders.

"Where are they?" Will shouts, voice breaking in the middle of the query. To Hannibal's consternation, tears begin to form in Will's accusing blue eyes. "Why did you- God, Hannibal, how could you?"

It's as though Hannibal has done something irreparable. "Will, we should go in. You're not even wearing shoes," the doctor points out reasonably.

Will appears to want to say something, but a car drives past, and his words die in his mouth. He then turns and strides back home. Hannibal follows closely, Will's coat over his left arm, but Will never once glances over his shoulder as he enters and heads up the stairs.

"Will-"

"Fuck off," Will snarls. His voice is thick, as though he is crying. "Go find yourself a proper rent boy or something. I don't need anything you give me." He dashes to his room and locks the door, leaving Hannibal on the other side.

*****

He knows he's overreacting, but he can't help it. Every single garment that Hannibal bought him is yanked out of the closet, and thrown into the middle of the bed. He's staring at the pile and swiping ineffectively at his cheeks when his phone trills.

Hannibal is calling him from the other side of the door.

Incensed, Will grabs his phone and hurls it at the wall. It leaves a dent in the plaster but keeps on ringing; Hannibal must have heard the impact but refuses to stop. Will screams, "I said fuck off!"

"Will, open this door," Hannibal says. It's a deceptively cool tone.

"What are you going to do if I won't? Buy a new one?" Will takes the bedside lamp and smashes it against the closed door. The sound is darkly satisfying and Will looks around for something else to throw.

Apparently Hannibal's answer is to break open the door with his shoulder. He looks beautiful and dangerous, Will thinks abstractly, even as Hannibal mutters in a foreign tongue at the smashed lamp all over the floor. The tension is only in the set of his brow and there is a hint

of it across his shoulders; anyone else would be shouting at Will right now. Will's grip on a glass bottle from the dresser tightens.

The doctor looks at Will. "Is this an appropriate response to my getting you new gloves?" he says calmly, as though he is merely explaining the Golden Ratio, but Will can sense the confusion and ire simmering beneath the facade.

"No, but it's fucking fun!" Will snarls, and dashes the bottle into the wall where his phone was thrown. The glass splinters. "Like it's fun for you to do whatever the fuck you wanna do!"

****

Hannibal's temper nearly snaps. He strides in, ignoring the shards that dig into his slippered feet, and throws Will onto the bed, atop the clothes Hannibal has bought him. Will fights as expected, all teeth and claws and kicks, and Hannibal straddles him and pins down his wrists. His expression does not change as Will tries to buck him off.

"Get off me!" Will screams. "Get the *fuck* off me!"

Hannibal does not move. He lets his weight rest entirely on Will even as the young man yells and thrashes and struggles, and waits for the fight to go out of Will. Beneath him, Will is disheveled and red-eyed, wild and incandescent. Hannibal wants to rip him apart and drink in his blood, taste the fire that must race through those veins, swallow his heart until it beats in concert beside his own.

Eventually the young man stops struggling, but the fury in his red-rimmed eyes still lances into Hannibal.

Hannibal takes a deep breath. "I wish to know what I've done wrong. Please tell me, Will."

The young man evidently did not expect Hannibal to take this tack. His lower lip trembles delicately before he bites into it, hard enough to break skin, and then the tears broke through his control. It is alarming how quickly Hannibal wants to keep him wrapped in the softest fleece in the world and let nothing, not even himself, harm Will again.

You are obsessed with him.

I am in love.

Obsessively so.

"You bastard," Will gulps. "You goddamn- you utter *bastard*."

Releasing Will's wrists, Hannibal sits to the side and tugs Will into his embrace. The young man shoves at his shoulders ineffectually, but soon submits to his manhandling. Hannibal caresses Will's curls and lets him cry. His shirt is becoming damp with tears and sweat; Hannibal can't decide if he will keep the garment or burn it.

"They were the only things I have of my *mother*," Will hiccups into his chest. He is becoming exhausted now and his fingers dig into the damp shirt. "The only proof th-that she lived with Dad, that she was *real*. You goddamn bastard. You didn't have to d-do that. How could you do that?"

How indeed. Hannibal is overcome with remorse. It was done in a fit of pique, just because Will rejected his gift. He presses a penitent kiss to Will's tacky brow, and another to bloodied lips. The copper of Will's blood should have tasted like fine wine, but remorse makes it sour. Sighing, he carries Will out of the young man's bedroom and into his own, away from the destruction. His feet remind him of the injuries he sustained, walking over the shattered glass lamp in thin slippers, but Hannibal lets the pain be his penance.

Will doesn't fight him, too drained from his display of temper. Hannibal places Will on the left side of his bed; the young man promptly curls to face away from Hannibal. The doctor strokes Will's hair until he goes limp, and then goes into the bathroom to pick out glass slivers from his bloodied feet and bandage the few cuts. Thankfully, there is nothing too deep. Though, considering what damage he has wrought, Hannibal thinks that he should drink ground glass and let himself bleed to death internally. It is how he feels, anyway.

When he comes out, he is almost relieved that Will has fallen asleep, entirely wrung out.

Hannibal knows he has to clean up the blood that dots the hallway from Will's room to his, and he should clean up the other bedroom. He should call Mrs Komeda to inform her that Will isn't going over for practice. He has a patient in about an hour from now, and he holds himself to the 24-hour cancellation policy.

Instead, he sends out brief phone messages that border on being terse. Hannibal sits on the edge of the bed behind Will, hoping that there is enough in Will's heart to forgive.

*****

Will wakes up with a headache and a growling stomach. He sits up, slowly realizing he is in Hannibal's room. A check on the clock on the bedside table tells Will that he has been asleep for more than half the day. The older man is nowhere to be seen; Will wonders where he is.

Then he remembers what happened earlier in the morning.

He wants to scream again, or maybe smash something, but he's already done all that and now there's an empty, gaping hollow inside him. A hint of guilt creeps in around the edges when he remembers his tantrum. He never told Hannibal why he didn't want those gloves. Hannibal didn't know.

It doesn't absolve Hannibal of that petty act though.

Will walks sluggishly out of the room and then halts when he sees Hannibal sweeping up the remains of the lamp he smashed earlier.

"Will." Hannibal straightens and sets aside the broom.

"I'm sorry for the overreaction," Will says. "Guess the anger management bits need working on."

Hannibal softens and takes one step forward.

Will retreats, just that one step back, keeping the same distance between them.

Although the older man's face remains impassive, Will sees the hurt that passes over Hannibal's eyes. The doctor exhales. "I apologize. I didn't know they were important."

"I think," says Will hesitantly, "you and I both know that it's not about the gloves." He licks his lips and goes on. "You told me that anger is a secondary emotion, that there's something deeper that causes us to lash out. I don't know what it is yet, but... I can't stay here with you while I try to figure it out. I'm still pissed. I don't want to be, but I am. I need.. I need some space for a bit."

He notices Hannibal's hands clenching. The doctor's voice is seemingly calm when he asks, "Where do you intend to go then?"

"If it's all right with you," says Will, "I'd like to stay over at Miko's. If Mrs Komeda doesn't mind."

Hannibal stares abjectly at Will, who meets his gaze without flinching. Eventually, Hannibal folds. He steps aside and out of his slippers for Will. "There's glass inside. Be careful."

Will puts the slippers on. There are some dark spots in the heels.

"Are your feet-" Will begins, and then says, "Sorry."

"They're fine."

Will starts grabbing some flannel shirts and long-sleeved tees to stuff into his backpack. His face grows warm when he tucks Hannibal's red pullover inside as well, so he ducks into the bathroom for his toothbrush. When he emerges from his room, he sees Hannibal slouched against the wall, the air of defeat and dejection practically pouring out of the doctor.

In that moment, he looks every one of his years.

Will bites on the inside of his cheek, throat aching with emotion. He goes up to Hannibal and carefully touches his face; Hannibal's eyes flutter close at the tender contact.

"Hannibal," Will whispers, "I do want this. Us."

"Then don't go."

Will almost tears at Hannibal's quiet plea. Instead, he presses his mouth to the other man's soft lips and murmured, "I need to."

Hannibal pulls Will close, almost desperate, and whispers against Will's mouth, "Promise this is temporary."

"I'm not breaking up with you, Hannibal." Tangling his fingers into silvery blond hair, Will kisses Hannibal again. "I won't break up with you."

"Not even if Mikolaj-"

"He's only a friend." Will smiles ruefully. "Was all this because you were jealous?"

Hannibal looks contrite. His hair falls forward, and he manages a half-smile. "Perhaps. I suppose I need to think over... over this also." He nudges Will with his nose. "Eat something before I drive you over. I'll call Mrs Komeda while you eat."

*****

Mikolaj is curious but he doesn't push for details. "Sure, you can use the room next to mine. House is fucking huge anyway."

"You just ring if you need anything, darling," Mrs Komeda assures. "Stay as long as you need."

"I don't mean to impose, Mrs Komeda, it's just... He has a tough case with Mr Crawford and I don't want him to, um, worry about me."

Mrs Komeda's shrewd gaze puts the lie to Will's words, but she knows he's lying because her nephew is around. She pats him on the shoulder and leaves him to settle in.

"Hey Will," says Mikolaj before Will goes into the guest room. "I've a party the evening after next. Starts at nine. Just a small one."

"Don't worry, I'll stay out of the way," says Will with a tight-lipped smile.

Mikolaj rolls his eyes. "I don't mean that. I want you to join in. Most of us are a year or two older than you, but they're a fun bunch. Music, food, dancing."

"I'm, um, I'm not good with people." Will glances down at his feet. "I dunno about a party. It'll, uh, require me to be sociable."

Mikolaj shrugs. "You can hang out by my side the whole time. Look, you look sorta down, and maybe you wanna mope about, but you may make some new friends too."

"I... I don't know how. I've never been to a party."

Mikolaj grins. "Don't worry. I'll look after you."

"Okay." Will managed a nod and then scurries into the room. It is very clean and stylish, brightly lit, and nothing like his own room back at home. Will peels off his shoes and socks before curling into bed with his current book, *Of Human Bondage*, and tries not to think of Hannibal.

*****

After he drops Will at Mrs Komeda's estate into Mikolaj's care, Hannibal returns home and tidies up Will's mess before he sends Jack the profiles for the family killers. At eleven, he gets his equipment ready. At midnight, he heads towards an out-of-the-way diner, parking at a discreet distance that allows him a good view of the back exit.

A man saunters out at half-past one, calling out a farewell to his colleagues.

He lets the cook leave, taking note of where he goes, and follows at a discreet distance.

It is in the middle of a deserted path towards the suburbs when he sees the pickup with the hood popped, the man peering into the engine and cursing loudly. He doesn't pay attention to the car that passes him.

Hannibal stops the car a short distance away and checks the fastenings on his plastic suit. Jerry Arness will serve a better purpose as Will's welcome home meal.

*****

*****

The next morning, Will spends most of it seated at the piano, mind numbed and blank. Mrs Komeda sits beside him while he practices, though all he can manage are Hanon exercises. The dull routines are already second nature to Will, but he lets his fingers run through the fifth, tenth and fifteenth drills until he feels ready to talk.

"First argument?" she asks wryly.

Will flushes. "Yeah." Off her look, he adds, "He, um, threw something important to me away. Because I wouldn't accept his present."

"Did he know it was important before he threw it away?"

The young man has to shake his head. He feels unsettled, but Mrs Komeda exudes calm, which Will finds grounding. It is similar to how he feels when Hannibal is in the same room, as though Will can pick up stability from those around him. Perhaps that was why he found it hard to stay calm in school. Too much input.

Mrs Komeda tuts. "And how did you react, Will?"

Shamefaced, Will says, "I wrecked my bedroom and, um... I-I just. I behaved like a spoiled kid."

"But did you destroy anything he gave you?"

Will has to think. "I tried, with the phone, but... well. I couldn't. It'll be wasteful. But I guess he'll just replace it anyway."

"Why do you sound so resentful of that, Will?"

"Because he keeps getting me stuff." He pauses, considering, and then the words pour out of him in a torrent. "And the worst thing is I know he means well. But... but he keeps treating me like a kid, like I can't take care of myself. And I already owe him so much, and he *keeps* buying me stuff, really expensive stuff, and I can't ever pay him back, and he just doesn't see that I don't need any of it. And I don't really know how to tell him no, but I did, and he's upset because I said no, and then he throws away my mother's gloves, and I know I screwed up with the whole tantrum thing, but I'm angry that he just doesn't *see*. I don't know how to tell him that without upsetting him, and I just want us to be together and I don't need or want anything else."

The woman sighs and rests her cheek against her hand, elbow resting against the piano. Her dark eyes search Will's face, as though trying to evaluate if he's telling the truth, but there's a teasing smile playing over her painted lips.

"To be young and in love again," she sighs. Then her expression becomes more somber. "He has apologized, has he not?"

Will nods miserably. "I just... I don't want him to just, I dunno, ignore my wishes. Like I don't matter."

Mrs Komeda startles him with a bright trill of laughter. "Darling, do you have any notion how much power you hold over Hannibal? I've known him since he was a resident at Johns Hopkins. I have never seen him besotted."

Will tugs on a string on his jeans. "I'm sure he's had other... partners."

"A handful of women and a man or two, but he didn't care for them much. They were accomplished, and pretty, and meant absolutely nothing to Hannibal. They were there, and when the affairs ended, Hannibal just moved on. I've never heard of him being in any fight. He didn't care enough to be in one." Mrs Komeda tilts up Will's face. "He worships you, dear boy."

"That's not - I'm just *me*," Will sputters. "I'm nobody."

Mrs Komeda laughs, kind and amused. "Why do you think he gives you all these things, Will?"

"I... He wants to take care of me, I guess."

"He doesn't only want to take care of you, he wants only the best for you, darling," Mrs Komeda chides. "He'll probably never want me to tell you this, but Hannibal's a romantic at heart. If you ever attend an opera with him, you'll see. That's about the only time he allows himself to show his feelings."

Will swallows. "I don't understand. Doesn't he usually? I know he's not very expressive but-"

"He does not *ever* show his true emotions, my dear boy. I've put on my share of masks to recognize a fellow thespian. You, Will Graham, are the exception - he can't hide himself when he's around you. It's absolutely *precious* to watch." The woman ruffles Will's messy

curls and says, "Do give Hannibal a call later in the evening, darling. He's probably killing himself wondering how you're doing away from him."

*****

It is nearly two in the morning when his cell phone rings. Once he sees the number, Hannibal picks it up immediately. "Will."

"*H-hannibal*," says Will. "*Hey. Did I wake you? Of course I did, it's 2 a.m. Um, sorry. Do you want me to hang up?*"

"Will, don't hang up, talk to me. You didn't wake me." The psychiatrist shuts his eyes and tries to picture Will cradling his phone with both hands, blue eyes tired and shadowed. "I couldn't sleep. I didn't sleep last night."

"*I didn't either. I, um... I just.*" Hannibal can hear Will take a deep breath. "*I know it's really hideously late, but I talked to Mrs Komeda today, or she talked to me and, um, I. I'm sorry about the whole thing, and we'll need to sit down together. Um. We gotta talk it out.*" Will sounds uncertain and nervous. Hannibal feels a tendril of apprehension wrap about his gut. "*I miss you so much, Hannibal.*"

The words send a sharp, sweet note through Hannibal. He has to smile. "I miss you too, Will. I keep thinking you're just down the hallway, but when I stand outside the door, I'm reminded of your absence."

"*It's kinda silly, isn't it? It's been only two nights.*"

"An eternity."

"*Do you always listen to me sleeping?*"

Hannibal grins like a fool. "Sometimes."

"*That's fucking creepy. Um, sorry.*" Will chuckled. *"Do I snore*?"

"I did not hear any snoring." Hannibal changes the phone to the other ear. "Will you be coming home tomorrow?" He does not say please, but it's there.

Will hesitates. "*Um, Mikolaj invited me to a party tomorrow evening. This evening, technically. I kinda said I'd go. Is that okay?*"

Hannibal mulls it over, and then says, "I'll pick you up tomorrow morning then. Have fun at the party."

"*I'll settle for not embarrassing myself or Mikolaj.*" There is another pregnant pause before Will says, "*Hannibal?*"

"Yes Will?"

"*I- Thank you. Good night.*"

"Good night, Will."

Hannibal realizes he is still smiling after he hangs up. He then puts his phone away safely, and turns away from Jerry Arness strapped into the steel table, a metal funnel secured to his mouth. Humming *Ode to Joy* under his breath, Hannibal checks the temperature of the oil. Three minutes more ought to do it.

*****

*****

"This is a small party?" Will squeaks when Mikolaj drags him down from the room to another large hall. It is crammed with gorgeous young people, the girls in tight dresses and the guys in obviously expensive designer wear made to look casual.

The blond glances around. "Yeah. A hundred, maybe a hundred fifty. Small."

"Miko, I-I can't, there's too many people," Will stammers. It's been more than two months since he has had to mingle with so many, let alone strangers; he can feel the back of his throat start to close up in panic.

"Hey hey hey, Will, look at me, you'll be all right. I'm gonna look after you." Mikolaj grins broadly. "Come on. You can just stay here by the wall and watch people. I'll go grab some food for you." Mikolaj spies a willowy brunette and calls her over. "Krissy, this is Will, my aunt's guest. Will, this is Krissy, my ex. Sort of ex. Stay with him a bit, Krissy? Thanks, love."

"Miko-" Krissy shakes her head in exasperation when the young man weaves his way through the crowd. She turns to Will and smiles. "Hello. I'm Krissy Hahn. You look terrified."

"Hi. Will Graham. I, heh, I kinda am. Um. Terrified."

"Sorry about him. Miko always does what he wants," Krissy says with a roll of her eyes. She studies Will. "How did you come to know him anyway?"

Will fidgets. "I'm the pianist for his aunt's Christmas benefit."

"Wow. Impressive."

She is content to let Will try to merge with the wallpaper. However, some other girls come over to chat with her, and while Will is polite when spoken to, he isn't too comfortable when they start talking to him. His eyes skitter to the gaps between them, trying to find some way to escape.

Mikolaj returns after a while, laden with a plate heaped high with finger food. "Girls, girls, ease off, you're scaring him."

"Lay off, Mik, he's adorable," a black girl with a startling neon green dress with a leaf print coos. Will thinks her name is Deanna. "Come dance with us, Will."

"I don't, um. I-I should go." Will nods at them and flees the group. Mikolaj doesn't try to stop him; the girls pull the blond young man away to the dance floor.

He is nearly to the door that will allow him to escape upstairs when he collides with a tall, broad-shouldered guy and sends his drink spilling over his colorful shirt. Will apologizes profusely, certain that his face is completely red with mortification.

"It's okay, no foul," says the guy Will knocked into.

"Your shirt soaked," says Will. "I'm so sorry."

"Shut the fuck up about it. I don't know you, do I?" The other young man has a dangerous air about him, despite his lazy smirk and the cigarette dangling from his lip. "Robert. You?"

"Will. Um. Sorry." Will ducks his head. "I could get you another drink."

"Not your job." Robert takes a long drag on his cigarette. He seems a few years older than Mikolaj's friends, probably a boyfriend of one of the other guests. He crooks two fingers at a mousy-looking boy who looks younger than Will, and soon enough two clear drinks come over to Nigel.

Robert holds one out to Will. Will glances at it. "Um, if it's alcoholic, I'm not 21 yet."

"Neither are 98% of the crowd." Robert forces it into Will's hand. "You drink it as an apology." He grins, all teeth.

Not quite knowing how to get out of the situation, Will drinks.

*****

Will is quite certain he meant to go back to his room, to do some reading and more thinking, but he ends up talking to Robert and two of his friends. Mikolaj is nowhere to be seen, and Will isn't surprised. There are certainly more than enough people to occupy the older boy's attention. There is a thumping beat going - not anything he usually listens to, but it feels as though the music is in his blood - and eventually he is, to his own bemused astonishment, *dancing.*

He's actually dancing. With Robert and his dangerous smile and scent of cigarettes.

Will has lost count of how many songs they have danced to, but he feels great, like he's light and air and just that irresistibly heavy beat. Robert is all hands and Will keeps trying to twist out of them, laughing when the older guy eventually reels him in by the scruff of his neck and buries his nose under Will's ear.

"Fuck off, Robert, I'm already taken," Will protests feebly, pushing at Robert's bared arms. The latter's shirt smells of something alcoholic and sweat. Will wiggles away and a wave of dizziness hits him. He pushes his hair from his brow and is caught again by Robert.

"Then where's your girlfriend?" Robert asks.

"No girlfriend." Will wrinkles his nose. "Boyfriend. Don't think he'll like the term though, it's so... childish."

"Oh? Well, your boyfriend isn't around here either."

This is not *him,* Will knows. This is so far from Will Graham that he may be another person entirely. He should go up to his room and sleep it off. He can feel his heartbeat pounding in his ears. Sleeping it off seems a good idea.

He says as much, but Robert nips at his left ear and his hands slides to Will's hips to grip the young man tightly. "You're enjoying this party now, pretty boy. Don't leave."

A chill runs down Will's spine and he suddenly discovers how nauseous he feels. He shoves Robert's hands away and glares. The lights are too bright and too warm; he swallows the dryness from his throat. A prickly sensation of *wrongness* drapes over his neck and shoulders.

"Did you give me something?" Will demands. His skin is too hot and papery and tight. "Was there something in the drink?"

Robert's answer is a shark-like grin. "So? You're having fun, aren't you, sweetheart?"

Disgusted both with himself and Robert, Will shoulders Robert away and goes in search of Mikolaj. He bumps into a few people along the way but doesn't bother apologizing. Mikolaj is dancing with Krissy, closely and intimately. Will is torn between wanting to interrupt them and wanting to run to his room. He'd pick the latter, except he feels more and more sick by the second, and he doesn't know if he can make it to the guest room in time.

Thankfully, Mikolaj sees him and must have noticed that Will isn't well. He comes over and peers at Will. "Shit. What's wrong, Will?"

"I don't feel too good," Will admits.

Robert picks that time to appear. "Ah, that's where you've gone off too. Don't tell me Miko's your boyfriend, Will."

"What the fuck - Rob, did you dose him?" Miko pulls Will behind him and stares down Robert. "Fuck, man, did you even tell him what you were giving him?"

"He didn't seem to mind that much earlier," Robert drawls.

The lights are too bright now and Will bites on his lower lip, trying to stifle his groan. Krissy places her cool hand on his forehead. "Mik. He's reacting badly."

"Rob, get out of my house right the fuck now." Mikolaj quickly takes Will by his arm and leads him away.

*****

Will is absurdly thankful for the quiet of the room. "You should go back downstairs," he tells the blond young man.

"Will, shut up and drink," says Mikolaj. He pours yet another tall glass of ice water. "Fucking Rob Ashton."

It tastes wonderful and Will downs his third glass greedily. His head falls back onto the pillow; it slows the spinning a little. He feels Mikolaj's hand on his brow and swats at it. "I'm fine."

"You're not fine. You have a fever and you're shaking. Fuck. That bloody fucker. I'm gonna fucking kill him." Mikolaj sounds furious and scared.

Will squints at Mikolaj. The other young man looks fuzzy around the edges. "What did he give me anyway?"

"Probably ecstasy. Usually poeple ask him for it. I'm sorry, Will, I didn't know he'll trick you into taking it." Mikolaj swears again under his breath.

He swears a lot when he's nervous, Will discovers, and has to chuckle. The mirth brings him another round of dizziness, and his jaw clenches.

"God, Hannibal's gonna be so angry with me," Will groans and flings an arm over his face. The lights are too bright. "I wanna go home."

"I'll call him."

"I can do that."

"You just lie there and rest and drink the goddamn water, Will," says Mikolaj. "Now where's your goddamn phone?"

*****

Hannibal is in the middle of preparing the marinade for the thigh meat when he hears his phone. It's Liszt's *Liebestraum No. 3,* Will's ringtone. The party must be over if he's calling. Rinsing his hands clean, he picks it up from the counter. "Hello."

"*Dr Lecter, hi. This is Mikolaj.*" The young man sounds nervous.

Hannibal feels the blood in his veins turning to ice. "What happened to Will?"

"*He was tricked into taking ecstasy, um. I'm really sorry, I was supposed to be looking after him, but... Anyway, I'm having him drink lots of ice water and keeping him lying in bed, but I think he's reacting poorly to the comedown. He wants to go home.*" Mikolaj does sound repentant. "*I've had a bit to drink so I can't drive him home.*"

"I'll be there as soon as I can. Give him isotonic drinks if you have any, but don't let him take too much, and keep the lights dim." Hannibal doesn't bother with saying more.

*****

He can't stop clawing at his scars, so Mikolaj and Krissy each holds one of his hands. The couple bracket Will between them, and Will sags against Mikolaj, shivering and sweating. He doesn't want to open his eyes at all.

"If I ever see bloody Rob Ashton again..." Miko mutters.

"You know he gets everywhere there's money and parties," Krissy says, her voice low and soothing.

Will whimpers. "I want Hannibal."

"He'll be here soon," Mikolaj assures. "I've called him."

"Who's Hannibal?"

"His... I don't know. I don't care. As long as Will's okay when he gets here." Mikolaj sighs. "I shouldn't have got him to the party."

Will shakes his head minutely. "Not your fault. I shouldn't have drunk that. Whatever Robert gave me."

"Rob's an asshole," Krissy offers bluntly. "The other girls think he's hot so he gets invites, but he's an asshole."

Will wants to laugh, but he thinks that if he starts he'll end up crying.

*****

The butler ushers Hannibal up to the guest room where Will is. He enters the dim room and takes in the sight of the young couple protecting Will between them, and a sharp pang of envious gratitude shoots through the doctor.

Mikolaj bobs his head nervously and pats Will's hand right hand. "Hey. Dr Lecter's here." The blond young man lets go and his girlfriend follows suit, the two getting off the bed at the same time.

Hannibal is by Will's side in an instant. Will blinks tiredly at him. Hannibal allows himself a small smile. "Hey there."

"Hey yourself," says Will, and drapes his limp arms around Hannibal. He mumbles a soft plea into Hannibal's neck, "I wanna go home."

"And we will." Hannibal shifts so he can carry Will in his arms. The young man has filled out since he moved in, but he's not bulked up enough to give Hannibal any trouble. Mikolaj holds the door open for the doctor and trails after them to Hannibal's Bentley. His girlfriend stays with them, silently checking to see that no one is being too curious. They use another set of stairs to avoid the other guests. Hannibal can hear the loud music and the noises of the party inside; he wonders why Will ever thought he could enjoy anything like that.

Mikolaj looks thoroughly chastened. "I'm so sorry, Dr Lecter. I thought he'd gone back to his room after he said hi to some of my friends. Never thought he'd been drugged."

"You did well by calling me," says Hannibal. He knows why Mikolaj didn't call an ambulance, of course. "Who gave him ecstasy?"

Mikolaj appears torn between snitching and protectiveness. His girlfriend has no such compunction. "Robert Ashton. He deals E at all these parties. It's difficult to bar him, he just always seem to find a way in. I hope Will feels better soon."

"Krissy, shut up," Mikolaj grumbles. He swallows nervously and adds, "Um. My aunt isn't in tonight."

"I won't tell her, but you'll have to." Hannibal's tone brooks no disobedience. "I'm taking him home now."

Stoic and concerned, Mikolaj nods; Krissy squeezes his bicep in reassurance. Hannibal leaves them standing in the driveway, and thinks of a dozen ways to feed Robert Ashton's pathetic flesh to the feral dogs near Will's old residence. Will has curled up against the window and fallen asleep, his skin unhealthily blotchy and tacky with sweat.

His phone rings again. A quick glance tells him it is Jack Crawford. Hannibal picks it up anyway, knowing that the agent will call repeatedly until it's answered or even pay him a home visit, regardless of the time.

"*Dr Lecter, I apologize for the hour*." Jack sounds anything but apologetic. "*The Ripper's made a reappearance. Can you come over, even for ten minutes? The local PD is keeping the scene for you.*"

Hannibal wishes he could go, watch Jack's delicious frustration and futile rage over the display of a corpse fried on the inside and then butterflied over a steel table. He has quite enjoyed the use of boiling oil, though he doubts he'll try it again. The grease clung too stubbornly to the plastic. Instead, he says, "I'm sorry, Jack, you'll have to get someone else for this one. Will's running a dangerous fever at the moment and I can't excuse myself from him."

The heavy silence on the agent's end is palpable with blame. Eventually, Jack says, "*I can't get another person as you well know. You're the most familiar with the Ripper profile. Zeller will pass you the photos tomorrow morning. And if you can bear to tear yourself away from Will Graham for half an hour tomorrow, you can get the autopsy report from the morgue.*" The click of the phone is extremely discourteous.

It's a good thing, Hannibal considers, that he already has the next one lined up, or he would be sorely tempted to skin Jack and make him stare into his own entrails.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, it's not always sunshine and puppies in Hannibal's world.
The role of Mikolaj is kindly played by the Oakley version of Tom Hiddleston in *Unrelated*, and Robert is played by a younger Tom Hardy.
Liebestraum No. 3 can be heard here.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It is late morning when Will thinks the worst has passed. He is sitting up, and starting to wish he doesn't have to, when Hannibal shows Mikolaj into his room. The psychiatrist smiles at Will before he disappears downstairs; Will can smell the brunch Hannibal is preparing for him.

"Hi, Mikolaj," says Will, patting the empty space on the bed beside him. "Thanks for last night. I mean that, really."

"Will, hi. Dr Lecter said you haven't fully recovered." The young man took the offered seat. "Brought you your stuff, and a bunch of movies to cheer you up. Here's the Indiana Jones trilogy, *Fight Club* if you're, y'know, in a mood for violence, *Breakfast Club*, the best teen movie in fucking ever, and the best film ever made IMO, *Casablanca.*"

"I can't possibly watch all of these."

Mikolaj sighs and scrubs the back of his neck. "I really should be shot. I was supposed to be looking after you, for fuck's sake."

Will grimaces wryly. "I'm seventeen, Mikolaj, not seven. Stop blaming yourself."

"In that I have to agree with Will," says Hannibal from the door. He sets a tray next to Will, and offers a glass of water to Mikolaj. "Here, Will, see if you can keep this protein scramble down. Mikolaj, he will be fine."

Mikolaj bites his upper lip as he looks from one to the other. Once Hannibal leaves the room, he whispers, "Will, I'm really not trying to be rude or anything, but, uh, you're not just his PA, are you?"

Will knows his face is completely red. He bends to his scramble and does not look at Mikolaj at all until he is certain he won't choke.

"Oh. Wow." Mikolaj nods as if in contemplation. Then his brow creases. "He's... kinda really old, isn't he?"

"Not *that* old," Will mutters rebelliously.

"He's like, forty."

"Forty-one, yeah. He's a good guy. And I like him a lot." Will pushes the egg around, picking only the bits of sausage to eat. He glances at Mikolaj, gaze landing on a freckle on the other young man's nose. "I know it's kinda, um, unusual."

Mikolaj lets out a whoosh of breath. "Understatement."

"Yeah."

"Plus, if he treats you badly, it's not like I can round up some friends to beat him up."

"Huh?"

Mikolaj wrinkles his nose and muses aloud, "I really can't imagine dating a forty-something. I mean, you don't have much in common."

"We have enough," Will says. *Classical music, literature, pain of loss. Enough.*

Mikolaj's gaze is shrewd and knowing. The resemblance to Mrs Komeda is startling, and the younger boy shuffles deeper into his blankets. Mikolaj smirks. "So, uh, your staying over... lovers' tiff?"

"I'm not talking to you about that." Will thinks he sounds dignified enough.

Mikolaj laughs and ruffles Will's curls. "Auntie got to you first, huh. All right, you rest well, and, uh, hope you'll come over to practice soon. And if you ever need any help with your... unusual relationship, let me know."

*****

After Mikolaj leaves, Hannibal goes to work, and Will watches *Casablanca*. After the movie, he reads up on resistance forces in WWII and works on logarithms. Will doesn't know if they'll have the talk. He doesn't want to, but he knows they have to, and the sooner they get to it the less awkward he'll feel.

Dinner is a stilted affair. Hannibal sips wine and eats the seared liver in silence; Will picks at the tender, succulent meat, and tries to ignore the weight of all the words that have yet to be uttered. His eyes picks over the table's centerpiece in an effort not to look at Hannibal. Hannibal has brought the outside in: large pillar candles take center stage, arranged in three clusters of four on staggered stands, while wreaths of dried berries, nuts, citruses, and gold-painted leaves twined down the long table.

"It looks beautiful," Will remarks. He glances at the napkin and wipes his lips. "The centerpieces, I mean."

"Thank you. I decided to... channel my energies yesterday after dinner."

They clean and put away the dishes in more silence. Hannibal is still as graceful as ever, but Will catches the tired lines about the doctor's mouth and the hint of shadows under his eyes. The older man needs to sleep. Feeling somewhat guilty, Will knows that Hannibal did not rest last night either since he watched over Will as the drug worked its way out of his system. They stand in the kitchen regarding each other warily.

"Would you prefer to talk in the study or the sitting room?" Hannibal asks.

Will opts for the sitting room. There are fewer associations.

*****

The difference between having Will in the house and outside of it is stark. Hannibal can't help the small pit of resentment in the pit of his stomach at the complete change Will Graham has wrought on his life. Yet the young man's scent enlivens the rooms; his very act of breathing is melodious. Hannibal can't recall the last time he had dinner without music in the background.

Will can't keep still, though he tries. Hannibal sits on his right, only two careful inches apart; he loves the warmth that radiates from Will, and the scent of both nervousness and low arousal that seeps into the air around him. The sitting room is spacious; it feels as though they are running out of air.

"Um. So, uh, who goes first?"

"Before we get into that," says Hannibal, "I'd like to hear what happened last night."

Will pales. His fingers lace together and he seems to shrink. "I was careless."

Hannibal exhales slowly and puts a hand over Will's reassuringly. "I'm not blaming you, Will, I just want some details."

"Well, um, I followed Mikolaj down to the party. He said I could get to meet people, and I did, I like Krissy, she's like Mikolaj and doesn't put demands on me to be sociable, but then there was a bunch of girls who wanted me to dance. I excused myself - actually, I fled. Um." Will licks his lips and looks at where Hannibal's steady hand covers his own. "I bumped into this guy, Robert, and uh, spilled his drink."

"And he made you get him one?"

"No, he got someone to bring him two, and I told him I was underage and can't drink if it's alcoholic, but um, he said it's in apology to the spill so... so I took it." The young man bows his head. "He must've put it in then."

Hannibal squeezes Will's hands.

"Yeah. So, uh, we ended up dancing-"

"Dancing."

"Um, yes. And he became more and more grabby and I then thought that this was too weird, and then I started feeling sick, and um, I looked for Mikolaj, and he got me to the guest room I was staying in, and you know the rest."

Hannibal's jaw has been clenched since Will mentioned that Robert was 'grabby'. He imagines Will writhing against an amorphous villain, hair damp with sweat, lost to the psychedelic elements of the drug, while shadowy hands claw and grope over his Will. He thinks of Will's eyes, pupils blown, cheeks pink with exercise, moving to the beat of horrendously loud and tasteless music, *displaying himself-*

Will twiddles his thumbs and goes on. "So, I was thinki- ummff!"

Hannibal has surged forward, his mouth locking over Will's, and pushes Will onto the cushions. The fingers of his right hand clutch fiercely into dark brown curls, his left hand scratch up into Will's shirt over warm skin, and his tongue pushes into a warm mouth. His lips shift lower, seeking out Will's neck, and Will bows his back off the cushions with a gasp.

"H-hannnnngh-" Will's utterance is cut off again. As though in mute invitation, Will curls one leg around the older man, the other pushing ineffectually on the floor. The young man digs his fingers into Hannibal's shoulders. When Hannibal deliberately ruts into the hips below his, Will moans into the doctor's mouth. With some effort, Will pulls away. "Hanni- Hannibal, wait, stop. Please."

Hannibal thrusts once more, just as an emphasis, and stops moving. Will shifts to allow Hannibal to extricate his left arm from under him. However, he does not move off. Not when Will looks this wrecked beneath him with so little. The doctor allows a satisfied smirk to cross his face while his pulse slows to normal and his breathing calms.

Will catches the smug expression. "Jerk," he mutters, and kisses Hannibal again, quick and over too soon. "Um. I... we can't talk like this."

"I find this a perfectly adequate position in which to talk," Hannibal teases. He trails his fingers over Will's ruddy cheek. "A talk about our relationship in an intimate setting."

Hannibal settles between Will's thighs, his forearms supporting his weight, braced on either side of Will's head. He can feel Will's hardness on his abdomen. Hannibal has no intention of moving at all at the moment.

"You just have to have the last word, don't you?" Will remarks. His lips curve into that strange little fox-grin that has captivated Hannibal before. Then he averts his eyes. "Um. I'm not as mad about the gloves as I was the other day. Still a little pissed, but um. I'll get over it."

"You don't have to if you don't want to."

"What's done is done," says Will with a small shrug. "I've learned better."

There's another story there, but Hannibal doesn't push. He smiles and thanks Will with a soft peck to his lips. "I'd undo it if I could."

"And I hope you forgive what I did. With the, um. The phone, and the wall, and the lamp."

"I deserved that."

"You did," Will said with a short burst of laughter. "It was such a dick move, Hannibal. My mom's gloves, for Chrissakes."

Hannibal noses at Will's throat. "I apologize. It was immature and I won't do it again."

"Good. Not that I have anything else of hers for you to toss."

"There is you," Hannibal points out softly. "You are what is left of your mother."

There's a small tremble in Will's lower lip and he bites on it. "You're not gonna throw me away, are you?"

"Never." Hannibal seals the promise with a kiss to Will's brow. Then he pulls away from Will, allowing the young man to sit up.

Will instantly burrows into Hannibal's side, and the psychiatrist drapes his arm over the slender young man. Will shivers and his breath becomes a touch more shaky, but as Hannibal caresses his side the young man relaxes.

His tongue darts out to wet his kiss-reddened lips. "So. Uh, I just. I know you want to give me things. Good things. I mean, the food and, and the shoes and the clothes. It's all... I needed those things. But when you give me things I don't need, I feel..."

"How do you feel, Will?"

"I feel indebted. Obligated." Will takes another deep breath. "I've never had much in my life. What I got given, I took care of them."

"You ascribe an emotional weight to presents."

"Yeah, I guess. And you... you give me so many things, and they're of great quality, and I just- It's overwhelming. Sometimes I feel like you're trying to bind me with all these things I can never repay you for - I know it's stupid to think that, but I do - like you want nothing on me that isn't yours. And, and it's insulting, like you don't trust me to stay with you because I want to." He pauses.

Hannibal mulls over Will's words. Finally he says, "Do you feel as though I'm trying to bribe your affections?"

"Kinda. Sometimes."

The doctor sighs and presses his mouth to Will's crown. They stay like that for a while, nestled together. Will plays with Hannibal's fingers in his lap; Hannibal rests his cheek against dark chocolate curls.

"For the most part, I enjoy purchasing items for you, the more personal the better. There is something... pleasurable seeing you use what I've bought you," the psychiatrist eventually admits. "Yet I must admit that part of me is terrified that I am not good enough for you."

Will peers up at him curiously. "I don't understand."

"You are young, full of potential, and beautiful. I am but a lonely forty-year-old man. Why would you stay with me?"

*****

"Are you serious?" Will is gobsmacked. "You can't be serious."

He studies Hannibal, sees the man avert his gaze, the slight pursing of lips. Will cups the older man's jaw and makes him look Will in the eyes.

"I'm the one who can't believe this - all this, all of *you* - is real. Some mornings I wake up and I don't dare to open my eyes because you, you are a dream. You are patient and intelligent and kind and understanding and-and *you*. You could be a diner chef and I would still love you. You just. I look at you and I." Will pauses and looks down. "I don't mean to be, um, obsessive or anything, but I... I survived losing Dad. I don't think I can... I won't survive losing you."

The quiet between them is poignant. Will thinks he's said too much, but Hannibal hasn't freaked out, so he goes on.

"And I don't see what you see in me," murmurs the young man. "I'm weird and *broken.* Everyone thinks so. Can't control me temper, can't socialize like a normal human being, and, and can't be normal in a relationship. And I'm just... me. Just Will Graham."

Hannibal is very still. When Will meets his gaze, he sees the doctor's maroon eyes shimmering with too much emotion, his lips parted slightly.

Will bites his lip. "Hannibal?"

"You said... You said you love me." Hannibal smiles, gentle lines framing his mouth and eyes. "Do you really?"

"I-" Will blushes. His neck feels hot and his chest tight. "Yeah." Suddenly worried, he asks, "Is it too soon to say it?"

Hannibal smiles wryly. "I wouldn't know. I've never said it to someone not from my family."

"Not even your other partners?" When Hannibal shakes his head, Will chuckles and confides, "Mrs Komeda says you're besotted with me. Are you?"

"Yes. Irrevocably and utterly." He leans forward and rests his brow against Will's, and murmurs, "Tell me again."

"I love you."

Hannibal almost trembles at the honesty in the tone. He kisses Will tenderly, as though trying to swallow the syllables from the other's mouth.

"Again," Hannibal demands, intoxicated with an unfamiliar, fierce, bright joy. "Again."

Will lets his mouth touch Hannibal's. "I love you." He repeats a few more times, punctuating his declaration with soft kisses.

It does not make sense. Repetition should dull the effect, but every single proclamation stings Hannibal's core with the same ferocious, possessing bliss; he pulls Will into his lap and they kiss more deeply, as Hannibal tries and fails to understand why such simple words can stir his soul.

When they finally separate, Hannibal says fervently, "Come to my bed tonight, Will. Let me adore you."

Let me worship you.

Let me devour you.

Let me into the darkest parts of you.

"Hannibal, I-I'm not-" Will is blushing all the way down his neck. Hannibal can imagine the spread of pink spread over the young man's chest. "I don't think I'm ready for, um. I-I don't. Uh, not yet. Not for sex."

"Will you let me touch you?" asks Hannibal. He is not trying to plead, but it comes close to it. "Let me touch you, Will."

The young man rests his left hand over Hannibal's heart, and does not look the psychiatrist in the eye. Hannibal waits, suspended and straining, until Will nods.

*****

Will knows he is probably beet red. He follows Hannibal into his bedroom, their hands linked, and swallows when he sees the deep blue sheets, nearly ink-black in the golden light of the bedside lamps.

This would be a good time to panic, he tells himself, but instead of fear, he feels nervous anticipation unwinding around his limbs. The last time he was here, it was after he had trashed his room. No wonder Hannibal wants him here, now. Bad associations to be replaced by the sublime.

Hannibal comes to stand before him and wrap his arms around Will's waist, his mouth nipping at Will's ear. "What is occupying your busy mind now, Will?"

"Um. In case it's not obvious? I've never, um, done anything like this." Will ducks his head and splays his fingers over Hannibal's muscled forearms. "Not that I don't want to, but, uh, it's. My brain seems kind of, um. I dunno."

"Then we shall quieten your brain," Hannibal breathes. He pushes the flannel shirt off. "You wear too many layers, dear Will."

"Says the man who puts on a three-piece suit on weekends." Will busies his fingers with undoing Hannibal's buttons, but he keeps fumbling. He willingly tips his face up for Hannibal to kiss, parting only when the older man pulls his tee shirt over his head. As Hannibal's elegant fingers skim over his ribs and up his back, Will suddenly froze.

The scars. The burn. God, the burn.

Hannibal draws back. "Will?"

"Um, could you turn out the lights?"

*****

Will shivers when Hannibal skates his fingers over the scars and marks on his back without even looking. Turning them around, the psychiatrist walks Will backwards until the young man is seated on the bed. Hannibal then kneels in front of him and presses his face against Will's chest, mouth over Will's heart. "My sweet Will, you need not be ashamed of your scars."

"They're ugly," Will whispers, fingers clutching at smooth sheets.

"They're exquisite. They made you *you*, Will Graham." Hannibal laves his tongue over Will's nipples, first the left and then the right, and then carefully teases the buds until they are hard. He murmurs, "Michelangelo himself would beg to paint you."

The hyperbole brings an embarrassed smile to Will's lips. He swats at Hannibal's shoulder. "Flatterer."

At least his thoughts are taken off his scars. Hannibal keeps his lips and tongue busy with tasting Will's skin, while he worked to divest the young man of his pants. He can feel Will's apprehension, despite his arousal, and says, "I promise, Will, that I will stop when you say so, and I promise we won't have intercourse tonight."

"Oh god, you had to say it." Will covers his face. The tips of his ears are bright pink and Hannibal leans up to flick his tongue over them. To his delight, Will giggles, and Hannibal pushes him to lie flat to relieve him of the offending pants and underwear. "Oh god, I'm naked. Hannibal, why am I naked? Why aren't *you* naked?"

Hannibal laughs and sheds his shirt. If it were any of his previous partners, he'd have taken the time to fold the garment; he tosses it where Will's clothes are, covers the young man's body with his own. It is a lovely sensation and his skin drinks in Will's body heat and responds to it eagerly. There is a very slight chill in the air but Hannibal doubts either of them will notice.

"I may have wondrous powers of restraint, my sweet Will, but if you think I can be naked in a bed with you with no repercussions, you clearly think I am superhuman." He peels his young lover's hands from his face and rolls them so they lay on their sides to look at each other.

Slowly, Will's gaze drifts up and is caught. His hands reach down to rub over Hannibal's chest, playing with the curly, graying hair shyly. His nails scratch down Hannibal's torso and up again, before he sidles closer and sucks on the older man's nipple, mimicking what Hannibal did earlier.

Hannibal bites back a groan. The young man laughs softly and then nuzzles under Hannibal's chin, lips and tongue seeking a sensitive spot that they discovered not long ago.

"You said something about touching me," Will mumbles into warm flesh.

"Patience," Hannibal purrs. He enjoys Will's tender and hesitant explorations, more so now that he has had three evenings without. When Will finally pulls away, breath coming in little

huffs, Hannibal tells him to sit up and lie against the headboard. Will almost asks, but he bites his upper lip and does as instructed. The doctor slides his hand along Will's legs from ankle to the back of his knees, bending the lithe limbs, and drapes them on either side of his thighs.

Will squirms under Hannibal's scrutiny. The blush now colors much of his torso, and his eyes - when they flick up to see Hannibal - are almost fully dark. His lips are parted and he keeps wetting them with his tongue, as though unaware of the effect on Hannibal.

The older man kisses Will, moving from mouth to neck to chest to belly, scraping his chin deliberately over sensitive skin. He ignores Will's feeble protests of stubble burn and plays his tongue and teeth over Will's hipbone.

"Hannibal," Will says, voice thin and breathy, "when you said you'll touch me, I figured you were referring to, god, to using your *hands*."

"And I will," Hannibal promises. He peers up at the young man and is struck anew with the fact that Will loves *him*.

*He doesn't know you, Hannibal. He loves this **version** of you. The human veil.*

It's as though Bedelia is here, judging his actions in her cool voice. Hannibal silences and banishes her. The last thing he needs is for someone to judge him.

"I will savor all of you," murmurs Hannibal. He moves closes to Will's uncut cock, and nestles his nose into dark curls. The scent is addicting and intoxicating. Will's sharp gasp adds yet another layer to Hannibal's mental portrait of his young lover. "If I could, I would swallow you, keep you safe within me. I will protect you with every fiber of my being, literally."

"That's... that's, god, that's kinda creepy, Hannibal, you-"

If anything, Will is more aroused by the thought. Hannibal brushes his lips over Will's erection and earns another whimper. The sound tingles like praise; Hannibal trails his tongue up the heated length and dips into the pearling drop at the tip, his heightened palate luxuriating in Will's taste. Unable to resist, he closes his mouth over Will's cock and sucks gently.

"Wait, H-hannibal, I can't-" Will's choked gasp is Hannibal's only warning. The young man comes with barely a touch. Hannibal licks stray drops from his lips and chin. Will is shielding his face again, mortification leaking from every pore. "I'm sorry, Hannibal, I couldn't- God, that's so... so fast."

Hannibal cleans off his thumb and presses soft kisses up Will's abdomen. It is filling out nicely and Hannibal is proud. "Hush. It's fine, my sweet, you've never done this before. It's to be expected."

"But I-" WIll's hands are pulled away from his face and Hannibal kisses his lover's damp brow. He looks almost comically miserable. "I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for," says Hannibal. He strokes the outside of Will's thighs. "We'll work on your stamina."

"You make it sound so... technical," Will grouses. He slides his left hand over Hannibal's chest and belly. "Um. You didn't actually use your hands on me."

"You want me to touch you right now?"

"Not yet, no, but, uh. I can. Maybe I can, um, touch you instead?" Will offers, hesitant.

The doctor shifts so that Will is sitting in his lap. "Only if you want to."

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"You'll have to, um. I'm not really sure how to do this." Biting his upper lip, Will unbuttons and unzips Hannibal's pants, and then reaches into dark briefs to draw out the man's cock. Hannibal hisses and his remarkable eyes flutter close. A momentary flicker of alarm passes through Will as he realizes that they are sitting together, he's in the nude, on Hannibal's bed, and *he is really going to jerk Hannibal off.*

"Um. I... do you want lube?" Will asks. He used to do it dry himself, quickly and efficiently, but he likes jerking off in the shower too.

Hannibal's eyes open a slit. "If you take your hand off me right now I swear I will make you memorize and recite *Kubla Khan*."

Will stifles a burst of laughter. "Bossy." He wraps his right hand over Hannibal's cock - it's darker and slightly longer and thicker than his own, and it is very warm - and starts moving. His own flaccid penis brushes over his wrist; a small thrill of arousal pools in his gut. A few more strokes and he is again interested.

Hannibal glances down and smirks. "Hello there."

"You are *not* talking to my erection," Will says.

"Why not? I like *him* a lot," says Hannibal, still insufferably smug. "But we have to accommodate his reappearance."

"What? And stop talking about-" Will is both embarrassed and highly amused.

Hannibal kisses his nose and twists around to reach for a small jar on the nightstand. Will doesn't pay attention to what the psychiatrist is doing, too busy admiring the play of light and shadow over the muscles in Hannibal's back.

When Hannibal faces him again, there is a spark of mischief in burgundy eyes. Will opens his mouth to ask but gasps instead when Hannibal wraps both their erect cocks in his and Will's right hand. He has slicked up his hand, and the motion is now much smoother.

"I think you - and *he* - like that," Hannibal purrs, supremely satisfied with whatever he is seeing on the young man's face.

Will doesn't even swat him. He can't quite breathe, the electrifying thrill of his cock pressed against Hannibal's turning his spine molten and his brain to mush. When Hannibal begins to move, Will has to throw his left arm around the older man's bare shoulders and bury his mouth into hot skin to stifle his whimpers.

"Do you like it, Will?"

Will nods frantically. He tries to keep himself from coming too fast again, and bites the inside of his cheek.

"Have you thought of this, Will?" Hannibal questions, voice low and raspy. "I have. I've dreamed of you, like this, in my arms, being taken apart by me. Again and again and again, until you lose track of everything but me, until you are *mine* alone."

His words sear into Will's skin and his grip hastens; Will cries aloud and digs his fingers into Hannibal's shoulders, the other hand trapped between them. He can feel his climax coming and he whines again, wanting to wait until Hannibal finishes, but Hannibal sucks a kiss into Will's neck and the younger man loses control. He comes with a broken cry, his vision whiting and his ejaculate smearing between them. He doesn't register Hannibal's climax, too lost in his own, but as he comes down he feels the minute shuddering of the psychiatrist's muscles as Hannibal regains his composure.

Will draws back slightly and pulls his hand from the mess between them. Hannibal's maroon eyes seek him out. Will meets his gaze fearlessly, and sees the faint worry inside the doctor. With his clean hand, Will pushes back Hannibal's fringe.

*****

Hannibal's pulse valiantly tries to settle back to normal. The sensation of Will coming undone is still vivid: his body tensing as he throws his head back, the soft keening from the bared throat, his nails digging into Hannibal's back even as his right hand clenched on their erections, forcibly dragging the older man into climax.

Hannibal needs time to regain his equilibrium. However, Will seems determined to torture Hannibal - he looks at his right hand, sticky with their shared ejaculate, and then flicks a tongue out to lick at his fingers.

The thoughtful grimace on the young man's face is adorable. Hannibal chuckles and kisses Will's cheek. "Don't do that."

"You did," Will argues.

"If I were younger, I'll take you right now." Hannibal rubs his nose along Will's jaw and under his ear. "What do you think?"

"It's... not as bad as I thought it'd be."

"Mm." Hannibal enjoys Will's weight on him. It's reassuring. "Shall we clean up?"

*****

They take separate showers, Will darting into the bathroom on slightly shaky legs while Hannibal fusses over the discarded clothing. By the time Will comes out of the shower, Hannibal has neatened the sheets and their clothes are in the hamper.

"Um, do you- should I go back to my room?" Will inquires shyly. He only has a towel wrapped about his hips, but it's too intimidating to sleep naked, despite what they just did.

Hannibal makes a displeased noise. "Only if you promise to return to me after you put on your sleepwear."

Will has never changed quite this rapidly.

*****

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Hannibal peers down at his young lover, still fully asleep, ear pressed against his shoulder. Will's arms are curled into his own chest, knuckles near his parted mouth, but his legs are twined with Hannibal's. It is a sweet display of ownership, and Hannibal brushes back a tendril from Will's face.

He woke up not too long ago, going to full alertness with barely a pause. His first thought was that he was not alone, and then he remembered Will and he falling asleep together over gentle kisses. The events of last night is still vivid in his memory, and he pulls each shimmering recollection apart and weaves them into a vibrant tapestry in the new wing of his memory palace.

It is remarkable how easily Will has forgiven him. He doubts he would have done the same were their positions reversed. Yet more proof that he does not deserve Will Graham.

The young man stirs. Blinking slowly, he looks up and smiles. "Hey there," he slurs, and presses his mouth to Hannibal's skin.

"Hey yourself," says Hannibal. "Good morning."

"It's morning?" Will drags himself over Hannibal to look at the clock, and then lies there sprawled over Hannibal's chest. "Mm. Six. We're up later than usual."

"It is Saturday. You can lie in bed all day if you want."

The young man chuckles. "Only if you remain here with me."

"Don't tempt me. I have a case to look through, and an opera in the evening." Hannibal runs his index finger along the line of Will's spine, while he assesses the burn on Will's left shoulder.

Will squirms under the doctor's touch and then settles into place. He is rumpled in a lovely manner, sleep-warmed and pliant. "Hannibal?"

"Hmm?"

"Are we gonna... Um. Am I going to be a secret?"

Hannibal mulls over possible responses. "Do you want to be?"

"See, this is why I don't like shrinks. They don't answer questions." Will softens the comment by rubbing his cheek over Hannibal's furred chest. "I'm concerned about your reputation and career."

"And if they were not a problem?"

"Then I'd want the whole world to know you chose me," Will murmurs. "You can have anyone. You chose *me*."

"You don't seem the type to gloat," Hannibal teases, but he comprehends the feeling. He plays with Will's curls and sighs. "I'd rather the revelation come from us than from others. My reputation matters little to me, to be perfectly honest, and my career is optional."

Will makes a sound almost like a purr as Hannibal scratches his scalp lightly. It's some time before the young man speaks. "So you're okay with people knowing about us?"

"I want the whole world to know that Will Graham chose me." Hannibal smiles and rubs his thumb over Will's lower lip, chuckling when Will catches his digit with his teeth. "Your tux was delivered on Thursday."

"Oh." Will leans up. "So... Opera."

"My acquaintances are there, and they'll be constrained by etiquette to do anything more than look." The doctor tilts his head. "There's no rush, Will."

The young man sits up and holds his gaze. "Do you love me?"

"What I feel for you cannot be encompassed by that one word," Hannibal tells him honestly.

"Tell me you love me."

"I love you." Hannibal kisses Will on the lips, close-mouthed, and smiles. "In every sense of the word, I love you."

That seems to decide Will. He slides off the psychiatrist and the bed. "Okay then. Opera tonight."

Hannibal can't help the genuine smile creasing his face. Will Graham is a surprising creature.

*****

"*You want me to attend the opera with my aunt.*"

"You said you'll help when I need you to," Will points out, his pen bouncing on his notebook. His reading is strewn across his bed. Hannibal is secreted in the study and has shooed Will

out, since the crime scene photos are classified and apparently quite gory. "Mikolaj, please. I went to your party. And got drugged."

"*You're guilt-tripping me.*"

"Is it working?"

"*... Fuck you, Will Graham. Fine, I'll ask, and when Auntie asks why I'll tell her you two are going on your first public date.*" Mikolaj sounds petulant. "*You and Dr Lecter have better put on a good show during intermission. Opera, jeez.*"

Will chewed on the tip of his pen. "Is it that bad?"

"*Probably not for you since you actually enjoy classical music and all that,*" Mikolaj says. Something bangs in the background. "*You got your tux and everything? It's opening night, it's gonna be a fashion parade. Think high school, only with adults.*"

"Mikolaj, I'm nervous enough. There's really no need to add more pressure." Will lets his breath out in a whoosh. "What was I *thinking* when I said I'll go?"

"*Probably something filthy about your doctor boyfriend.*"

"... I think you're right. Like the way he looks just when-"

"*No, shut up, I don't need to hear about that. See you, Will.*"

Hanging up, Will flops back down onto his sheets, his head narrowly missing *Of Human Bondage*. It was a spur-of-the-moment decision; Hannibal saying 'I love you' was so tender and direct and overwhelming that Will felt as though his heart would burst.

He still thinks he might explode with joy. It should scare him, the extent of his feelings; they have only started dating - if making out is considered dating - for three weeks, but he meant it when he said he doesn't believe he can survive losing Hannibal. Yet the doctor appears to reciprocate the intensity of Will's affections. Will hugs his pillow and fights down his grin, knowing he looks silly. Then he sobers up when he considers what he has promised to do.

The opera. Tonight. Hannibal's friends and acquaintances. It's gonna be high school, and a lot worse because the looks won't be targeting me, they'll be looking at him. Will groans into the pillow and then uncurls. *It'll be okay. We'll be together.*

He wishes he truly believes that.

Chapter End Notes

yes, the food is people.
specifically, Jerry Arness, whose thigh meat and liver have been used for a better

purpose.

Okay, uh, I swear they were supposed to make out on the couch only, I dunno what possessed Hannibal to get Will naked. But I like the idea of them teasing and laughing in bed, it's quite the sexiest thing ever.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will tries twice and gives up. Leaving the ends of the bow tie hanging from his collar, he pads over to Hannibal's bedroom.

"I need help," he says, not going into Hannibal's monstrously organized walk-in wardrobe. "And I need cuff links."

"In a moment."

Will stares at himself in the mirror. His hair has just been trimmed and is swept back from his brow. The severe lines of the tuxedo adds a year or two to him. He likes the waistcoat, but the collar is rather uncomfortable, and he's not certain this is *him*. But tonight is for Hannibal. The doctor emerges from the depths of his wardrobe already fully attired and with a small velvet box in his hand.

"Is the bow tie giving you trouble..." When Will turns around, Hannibal stops in his tracks. His lips part and his eyes widen appreciatively.

Will tries to stand still and not blush. He fails at both. "I look like a waiter," he mutters, bashful at the entranced look on his lover's face.

"You look perfect," Hannibal says, and smiles warmly. "Here. Cuff links first."

The ones Hannibal picks for him are circular, in onyx and silver in a yin-yang symbol. Will watches Hannibal secure one and then the other. "Why these?"

"To give you balance, Will," says Hannibal. "That is the core of the Tao. To find balance within oneself and to exist in a balance with the world. Ever changing, yet never changing. Like you."

"I don't find myself very balanced," Will says. "I feel very unbalanced at the moment. Like I'm teetering on the edge of something immense, and about to fall."

Hannibal tilts Will's chin up and his hands deftly weaves the bow tie in place. "Then I will secure you, sweet Will."

"What if you are what I am falling into?"

"Then we find solace and strength together, and climb out again." Hannibal smooths down the ends of the bow tie. Will catches hold of them and presses Hannibal's warm hands to his face. Hannibal exhales softly and touches their brows together. "You can still stay home."

"No, it's good. I want this." Will tips his face and kisses the older man briefly.

*****

"Who's that?"

"Is Dr Lecter-"

"This is some sort of joke-"

Will can hear the comments, muted as they are, and keeps close to Hannibal. He tries to ignore the surreptitious stares, but the skin on the back of his neck and his arms are tingling. He has the vague idea of running out into the night. The older man keeps his right hand on the small of Will's back, too low to be merely support. Will imagines the collective disbelief from the assembled crowd as Hannibal steers them towards friendly faces.

Mrs Komeda is all smiles as she accepts a kiss on the cheek from Hannibal and presses one to WIll's. Mikolaj stands nearby, already looking tremendously bored, but he still grins crookedly when he sees Will and Hannibal. Unlike Will and Hannibal, Mikolaj has opted for a dark suit and tie, and he has slicked back his blond hair.

"You look exceptional, darling," Mrs Komeda says. "I can already see quite a few faces turning green with envy."

Will blushes and resists playing with his cuff links. He knows that he looks very good; the expression on Hannibal's face earlier that evening was indelible. "Thank you. Hannibal picked them out."

"I'm glad you took my advice, Hannibal," she goes on. Then she lowers her voice and adds, "A few of your dinner party regulars are already trying to suss him out."

"And we will find out more during the intermissions," Hannibal says. "Have you seen Alicia? I saw this wonderful timepiece at Barry's the other day when I was picking out cuff links for Will."

Leaving Hannibal to chat with Mrs Komeda, Will steps aside to talk to Mikolaj and thanks him. The blond young man shrugs. "What can I say? I'm a bro. But seriously, Will. Five fucking hours of Wagner. I'm gonna leave after the second intermission."

"Sorry, um. Hannibal wanted to catch this. What am I supposed to expect? From... them?" Will indicates the people who are resolutely Not Looking.

Mikolaj smirks. "Well, the last time I attended was with Auntie and Johann, and everyone was trying so hard to be open-minded and above it all. But I guarantee that everybody will be talking about you. Just not to your face."

"Oh god, why did I agree to this?"

"Because it makes him happy?" Mikolaj suggests, bumping his shoulder against Will. "Cheer up, Will, it's not a torture chamber. For you anyway. You are gonna marathon some movies with me next weekend for this, by the way."

"I'll sit for a movie marathon." Will makes a face. "No, I know what to expect in a torture chamber. Torture. This? Not a clue."

"Aww. I'm sure Dr Lecter will protect you from the big bad wolves."

"Much as I hate to interrupt your scintillating conversation," says Hannibal with a tease in his voice, his hand returning to its spot on Will's back, just above the curve of his ass, "we should go in. It will be a long evening."

Mikolaj sticks his hands in his pockets. "See ya later."

*****

After they take their seats, Hannibal clasps Will's hand. "Relax, Will."

"Trying to," Will murmurs. He swallows audibly and shifts so he is closer to Hannibal. "You will let me know if I do anything embarrassing or inappropriate, right?"

"I promise. Just follow my lead."

"Okay." Will nods and squares his shoulders, as though he is readying himself for battle. "All right." He takes the program and reads it.

The audience is still settling in. Hannibal smiles at Will's focus, and breathes in the alluring scent of his lover. He wishes, almost, that the opera is already over, and he can bring Will home and undress him. Helping Will with his bow-tie used up much of Hannibal's self-restraint - Will had tilted his head back slightly, baring his throat, his lips parting, as though he was in the throes of passion - and Hannibal almost opted to forego *Tristan and Isolde.* Five hours of Wagner versus carefully unwrapping Will Graham from his immaculate tuxedo.

'*Descend, O night of love*' indeed.

The lights dimmed, and the conductor enters. Hannibal squeezes Will's hand once more, before leaning back into the seat.

*****

It is very easy to lose himself to the music, Will discovers, and he feels an actual ache in the pit of his stomach when Tristan drinks the potion, believing it to be his death. Tears spring to his eyes at the moment the two declare their love; he barely registers Hannibal caressing his hand in reassurance.

When the first act ended he has to drag himself back to the surface. Somewhat disoriented, he nearly misses Hannibal's gentle approval until the doctor kisses his knuckles.

"Thank you for bringing me," Will whispers.

"I'm glad you like it."

*****

A grumpy Mikolaj accosts Will when he sees the couple at the first interval. Hannibal escorts Mrs Komeda to the intermission area for drinks.

"I hate you," the older boy says as he drags Will to the bathroom, "to the core of my being."

Will tries to look apologetic. "It took twelve hours for the effects of ecstasy to pass from my system."

"There's only so much guilt I have, Will," Mikolaj warns. Then he cocks his head at the young man. "Are you enjoying it?"

"Yeah," Will admits. "I enjoy music in most forms. It's fascinating, the leitmotifs." He hums the first few bars he remembers. "Inconclusive and unresolved."

Mikolaj just blinks at him. "Will. I have no fucking clue what you're on about."

"Sorry," Will says. He listens to the prelude in his head again, and wonders why it haunts him.

*****

When Will returns with Mikolaj, Hannibal relaxes fractionally. Will is keeping his eyes averted from the other patrons, making a beeline for Hannibal, and the doctor holds out a hand for his lover. Will takes it gladly, and then blushes when he realizes that Hannibal is holding court.

Alica Hauss arches her painted brows. "And this young man is?"

"Will, this is Ms Alicia Hauss, she works for the senator," says Hannibal, a subtle rebuke of Alicia's tone. "Alicia, this is Will Graham."

"Hello," says Will. His shy nod wins him a couple of approving smiles.

Hannibal introduces the rest, and just as he is about to return to their previous topic, an unwelcome voice insinuates itself into the conversation.

"How are you finding the opera, Dr Lecter?" Frederick Chilton ambles forward. "We hardly see you these days."

"I am enjoying it very much, Frederick." Hannibal makes himself smile. Will seems to sense his disdain for the other man and tenses slightly. "How have you been? The patients of your hospital are thriving under your capable care, I hope."

Chilton lifts his jaw. "Of course. Abel Gideon is receiving a lot of mail, though. I'm surprised you have yet to interview him; seems like every psychiatrist has tried to analyze him, save for the one who helped catch him. He's asked after you, by the way."

"He does not interest me," says Hannibal coolly. The other patrons hang back to watch the drama unfold. Hannibal keeps Will's hand in his, and feels Will squeeze his fingers. "You must feel like a secretary, handling all his appointments and his fan mail."

The jibe brings an ugly flush of color to the other man. He takes in Hannibal and Will's proximity and smirks. "And I am sure you feel quite the parent, bringing this young man to this opera."

Hannibal tenses fractionally, barely a hint of annoyance around his mouth. The rest catches the mood, and a few are exchanging intrigued looks. Gossip is currency in this world, and this seems to be shaping up into a small windfall.

Chilton smiles condescendingly at Will. "You must be so bored, young man. Wagner is a strain at the best of times. What is your name?"

"I'm Will Graham, Hannibal's... well, boyfriend seems to be the common term. As a matter of fact, I am enjoying the production," says Will, his jaw tightening as he looks Chilton in the eye. "I particularly enjoy the depth and richness in the tenor's voice, very evocative. But of course someone who frequents the opera must know far more than I do about such things. Since you find it so tedious, I suppose you are therefore here to be noticed, Mr...?"

Hannibal has to bite back his amusement. "That's Dr Chilton, my dear. He runs the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane."

"Ah, my apologies." Will's lip curl into the tiniest sneer Hannibal has ever witnessed. "Dr Chilton. Pardon my ignorance. Hannibal never mentions you when we talk about our friends. Hannibal, Miko said Mrs Komeda wants to talk to us. Shall we?"

The young man turns his back on Chilton deliberately, and Hannibal approves of how neatly Will has dismissed Chilton's patronizing. There is a glint of ire in Will's eyes. Hannibal thinks Will looks utterly in his element right this second; he bids the others good evening and then lets Will lead them to Mrs Komeda, who has her own circle of admiring flatterers cooing over Mikolaj.

When Hannibal and Will arrive, the circle disperses. They know better than to intrude upon a conversation between the two, and until either of them acknowledge the rest, the hangers-on will keep away. They will still listen, of course.

"Did I miss something?" asks Mrs Komeda.

Hannibal nearly beams with pride. "Chilton. Will put him in his place quite neatly."

"Ah, that would explain why he looks like an overripe eggplant."

"Jerkwad," Will mutters under his breath.

"Will. Language."

"Well, he is," says Will defiantly.

Grinning, Mikolaj offers a drink. "Not spiked, I promise."

"The general consensus is that Will looks very handsome and completely adorable on your arm," says Mrs Komeda. She hands her empty glass to a passing wait staff. "You two make a

charming and distinguished couple, my dears. Now, Hannibal, you have to hold that party, everyone wants to meet Will."

Will blanches. "What? But I-I'm not-"

"You just have to do exactly what you're doing now, darling. Hang on his arm and look pretty." The lady smirks. "Not too difficult, yes?"

"I'm not good with crowds, honestly," says Will.

"Nonsense. You handled Frederick perfectly well," Hannibal says. He pats Will's hand in his. "Mikolaj, if you could take Will to the refreshments?"

"Sure thing."

*****

"Was what your aunt said true?" Will questions.

Mikolaj shrugs. He places a few things on Will's plate and snags another drink for himself. He steers Will to a corner of the room, away from the main crowd; they have a clean line of sight to Mrs Komeda and Hannibal, who are now talking to some other adults. Will knows then that Hannibal sent him away to avoid Will becoming the center of attention, and is absurdly pleased.

"Mostly. I did hear someone say something about... uh, this isn't nice, but I did hear someone mention 'cradle snatching'. But most of them are just curious about you."

"Fuck." Will huffs. "I'm not a kid. I keep getting this feeling that they think I, um, seduced him. Or something. I already know I'm not good enough for him, they don't have to rub it in."

"Well, everyone here is like a bajillion years old." Mikolaj suddenly frowns. "You think you're not good enough for him?"

"Hannibal's a doctor and a psychiatrist and, well, look at him. I'm just a kid."

"Will, you said not ten seconds ago that you're not a kid."

"Maybe I feel like one because they keep looking." Will chews on the inside of his mouth. "Don't tell me they're not."

Mikolaj grimaces. "Dr Lecter is mad about you. He keeps checking on you even as we're talking. And it's obvious you're mad about him. So fuck what others think, okay? You've won. Dr Lecter's yours. They're just plain jealous they can't snag him."

Will is slightly dubious, but decides that perhaps he should take Mikolaj's advice.

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It's almost midnight by the time they get back. Will has been in an introspective mood and Hannibal leaves him to his thoughts. Already he is planning a menu in his mind; he will need to gather his ingredients. He briefly considers Robert Ashton, but sets aside the idea. He may be taking his own product and if so, his meat will be unusable. Hannibal will need to look through his Rolodex, and to find time away from Will to butcher the pigs.

When they pull up and Hannibal parks, Will holds his hand and does not say a word. Hannibal waits. Then Will leans over and kisses Hannibal on the mouth and murmurs, "I love you."

Hannibal smiles. "I love you too, Will."

"So, um. I loved it. Not the, um, I didn't enjoy the photographers," Will tells him. "The food was nice. And the singing was... intense. In a good way."

"I'm glad you liked it," says Hannibal.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" asks Will. The dark interior of the car hides his gaze; the glow from the street lamps fall like amber dust over his shoulders and arm.

Hannibal can't read Will at this moment. "I did. I particularly enjoyed knowing you truly loved the music."

"Next time, can we not go to an opening night?" Will blurts out. He swallows audibly and lets go of Hannibal; he rubs the sleeves of his coat. "I feel like we're on display or something. It's, uh, I feel... exposed."

"Of course. Thank you for tonight, Will." Hannibal leans over this time and kisses him. "Let's go in."

*****

Will is tired, but not so tired that it doesn't arouse him when Hannibal starts undressing him.

The doctor removes layer by layer, hanging up the clothes to be taken to the dry-cleaners. He slides his clever hands along Will's languid arms, and carefully tugs off the bow tie. Will leans back into Hannibal's strong frame as Hannibal unbuttons his shirt and peels it off. His shoes and socks are already taken off, and he's increasingly drowsy. He wishes, almost, that he's more alert, if only to undress his lover in turn, but for the moment he is content to let Hannibal manhandle him.

"Do you want a shower?" Hannibal murmurs.

Will shakes his head. He feels heavy in his limbs and light in his mind; the music and voices from the opera swirl into textures of silk and skin as he crawls into Hannibal's bed. He barely registers the tender kiss on his brow or the shower running. By the time the bathroom door shuts, he's already asleep.

*****

*****

Will takes the pen out of his mouth when he sees Dr Bloom outside the door. She looks livid, and does not even greet Will when he utters 'good morning'.

"Where is he?" she demands.

"In the kitchen." Will is bemused. "What's-"

Dr Bloom pushes past him and storms right into the kitchen. She has a copy of the Sunday paper in her hand. Will hurries after her, just in time to see her slam the newspaper onto the butcher block.

"The hell is this, Hannibal?" she says loudly. "Tell me they've got it wrong!"

"Alana," says Hannibal. He calmly puts aside his second cup of coffee and picks up the newspaper. "Oh. The opera. Will, they agree with your assessment of the tenor."

"Is that so?" Will walks past Dr Bloom and scans the article. Hannibal points out the line. "That's... Wow. Guess I have a pretty good ear for opera, huh."

Will knows that Hannibal can't have missed the photograph of them standing together with Mrs Komeda and Mikolaj, taken during the second intermission. The caption states baldly that Will was Hannibal's date.

We look compatible, Will thinks, surprised. Hannibal looked immaculate and elegant; Will looks... different. Slightly older, more self-assured. Almost graceful in his pose. He likes the picture a lot.

Dr Bloom evidently does not appreciate them playing dumb. "Are you dating Will, Hannibal?"

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Hannibal smiles thinly. He is fond of Alana, but her discourteous manner is grating. "Yes, I am."

"You're his therapist! God, Hannibal, what are you thinking? And he's seventeen!"

"*He*," snaps Will, "is standing right the fuck here, Dr Bloom."

"Will, language."

Alana looks dumbfounded when Will folds the paper and returns it to her. "Will, this doesn't concern you."

"You are accusing my boyfriend of violating doctor-patient ethics, of course it concerns me."

Will always looks good when he's angry, Hannibal observes; rage brings a different sort of light into Will's eyes, and the young man forgets his discomfort with people when he's

roused.

"You come into our home like a, a virago," says Will, heedless of Hannibal's rapt scrutiny at Will's subconscious claiming of the older man's sanctuary, "and yell at *my* boyfriend like you have any right to. Who the hell are you to do so?"

"For heavens' sake, Will, you're young enough to be his son. He's clearly taken advantage of your situation-"

"I don't think of him as a father figure, if that's what you're concerned about, and he doesn't think of me as a son, so take your paper and sanctimonious attitude and leave." Will folds his arms and stands between Hannibal and Alana. "And just to reassure you, he hasn't taken advantage of me, I was the one who initiated this. And I'm damn glad I did."

Alana stands her ground, obstinate and protective. "You've misinterpreted gratitude with affection, Will. This relationship is *wrong*."

There is an arrogance in Will's stance that sends a low heat spreading through Hannibal. "In what sense? First of all, I'm seventeen. I'm *legal.* Second of all, he was never my psychiatrist. I never paid him, it wasn't official, and therefore doctor-patient issues don't apply here. It's not misconduct."

"Hannibal," Alana turns to him and pleads, "you're treading on thin ice with this. Do you even know what you're risking?"

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While Will doesn't want to flare up, Dr Bloom blatantly appealing to Hannibal in their confrontation pisses him off. She tries to step around him and Will interjects himself between her and Hannibal again.

"Will-"

"Why are you so upset?" Will asks, incensed. "It has nothing to do with you. You're not my doctor, you're at best his friend-"

He sees the flicker in her eyes and then with a shock he understands her anger.

"Oh my god," he breathes. "You like him too. You're actually *envious*. The lost opportunity."

"What?" Dr Bloom's face pales. "No, I've- No."

"He was your mentor and he didn't choose you," Will says quietly. Yet Dr Bloom looks as though every word hits her like a thunderbolt. "How long have you admired him, tried to win him over, tried to prove yourself good enough for him?"

"Will, that's enough," Hannibal says, coming forward to hold him by his shoulders. He presses a light kiss to Will's temple, a definite demonstration of ownership. "Alana, perhaps you should go."

"Your career, Hannibal. Your reputation," she tries for a last time.

Hannibal drapes his arm across Will's front. "I can rebuild a reputation. I can do without a career. But I will not let go of this. Will is non-negotiable."

Will almost wishes he can't see the hurt in Dr Bloom's gaze; he feels how upset she is at the rejection. She sweeps out, her perfume lingering like an accusation.

When they hear the front door close, both of them heave a sigh in unison.

"That could have gone better," says Hannibal. He kisses Will again, deep and tasting of coffee. "Perhaps she can finally face her feelings for Agent Katz."

"I'm sorry," says Will. "I didn't mean to lose my temper with her."

"All the points you raised were valid, Will, if made more vehemently than I would." Hannibal loops Will into his hold. "You surprise me on a daily basis, do you know that?"

"Do I now?"

"Nothing which I perceive in this world equals the power of your intense fragility," Hannibal quotes e.e. cummings, and kisses his lover. "Boyfriend does sound trite, but I suppose we will have to wait until a better term comes up."

Will nibbles on his knuckle. "Have I mortally offended your student?"

"She will get over any hurt feelings, Will, she's a grown woman."

"Did you know she likes you?"

"I was aware but I harbor no similar feelings," says Hannibal, returning to his coffee and tablet. He opens a new window and searches for his and Will's photo, and selects the more flattering one to save it. "In another life, perhaps I would have been content with her company. But in this one, I have found you, and I will be satisfied with nothing less."

Will smiles fondly. "You're so cheesy sometimes."

"Can I help it that all the beauty that I saw, desired and got was but a dream of thee?" Hannibal teases.

"I know that one," says Will. "Uh, John Donne."

"Mm. Good."

Will bounces on his heels. "I'm going to work on what I'm playing for Mrs Komeda's Christmas benefit. Probably for the rest of the day."

"All right. I have some files I left in the office on Friday that I need to review before tomorrow, so I might stay there for a few hours." Hannibal accepts the shy peck on his forehead. "I'll see you in the evening for dinner."

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Hannibal takes the Rolodex with him before he leaves the house. Will is already deep into his planning. While he has the traditional Christmas songs and the collection of Mozart's sonatas that Hannibal bought, they do not seem to meet Will's criteria; the young man has his laptop on Youtube and is listening to Liszt while making notes in his tiny handwriting.

He already has Robert Ashton's likeness on his phone. Facebook is useful for something; the muscular, arrogant-looking young man with the lazy smile is in many pictures, some tagging him as *Handsome Rob*. By the time Hannibal is done with him, he will not even recognize himself as human. Hannibal now has a general idea of where Robert lives; last night, after the opera, he managed to trail the dealer to a fairly quiet neighborhood. There were witnesses, however, and Hannibal has not really thought of what to do with him, so he drove home and slept with Will in his arms. His dreams were peaceful and golden.

And now he has a dinner party to plan. The usual practice is, of course, to select three from his Rolodex; the actual butchering is done in his basement, to ensure maximum freshness of the meat. He won't be able to do that with Will in the house, however. He will have to set up a separate workshop.

It will take some deft time management and a measure of solitude, Hannibal knows, if he wishes to continue with his hobby. It is not a compulsion, not really; he can do without killing, but he cannot deny there is a savage pleasure in the butchering of swine. Yet he will not risk Will finding out.

I won't survive losing you.

Hannibal's grip tightens on his steering wheel. There will come a time when he has to choose, he knows, and he isn't certain what his decision will be.

His phone rings. "Hello Jack."

"*Hello Dr Lecter. I know it's Sunday, and I hate to bother you, but we'd like your input on a crime scene.*"

Hannibal frowns. "It's no bother, Jack. Text me the address."

"*I'll have some officers escort you in from the main road. It's quite a trek.*"

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Mrs Komeda told him he has been allocated twenty minutes out of the full two hours, so Will decides to choose one traditional Christmas song, a classical favorites and something contemporary, and finish the set with a jazz piece.

O Holy Night is Will's favorite carol, so it's automatically on the list. Will is in the middle of deciding which Philip Glass piece he wants to try when the doorbell rings. He pauses the playlist.

After looking through the keyhole, he groans to himself. It's the redheaded reporter that came up to him two months ago, wanting his account of Garrett Jacob Hobbs. He tried to remember her name. Something that rhymes with hounds.

'Freddie Lounds. I'm a reporter. Tattle Crime. Hi. I'm so sorry about your father's brutal murder. Would you like to talk about it?'

'No. Fuck off. Or take a walk in the middle of the highway. I don't care which. Just leave me alone.'

The doorbell rings again. Will wonders whether she would leave if he pretends not to be home. Through the keyhole, he sees her looking over her shoulder and then she knocks.

"I know you're in there, and I know Dr Lecter's out. We can talk like adults, Mr Graham."

Will sighs and opens the door. "Miss Lounds."

"Hello," she says with a bright, fake smile. "May I come in?"

"No."

"So we'll talk here?"

"You'll talk, I might listen, and then you will leave," says Will. She sets his teeth on edge; there is something too cunning and persistent about her, and her eyes are always *digging*. Will can't find it in himself to try to like her.

Freddie Lounds cocks her head. "I've seen the pictures. Are you and Dr Hannibal Lecter really in a relationship?"

Will is stoic and silent. His nails dig into his palms and he slows his breathing as Hannibal taught him.

The redhead smirks. "How well do you know Dr Lecter, Will?"

"Why do you care?" Will snaps back.

"Because he is a consultant with the FBI on the Ripper case, and I wonder how appropriate it is for a consultant to have a relationship with a teenager." Lounds flips open a notebook and makes a great show of searching it for notes. "Oh, and there's something strange with those he treats. Three patients died after their time with him, two died while in his care. Violent ends. He appears to have a habit, Will, of treating those who have violent tendencies. And then there's *you*."

Will's sharp glare does not deter the woman. She pulls out yet a folder. It looks sickeningly familiar.

"Ah, yes. William Graham. Fight... fight... altercation... threatening language... fight." She snaps the folder shut. "You left your school after attacking a popular schoolmate with a mirror shard, I believe."

"How did you get my records?" Will snarls. He itches to grab them, but he knows that if he tries he will lose his temper, and the woman will have more proof that he's violent.

Lounds smiles like a snake. "I have my ways. If I can get insider information on FBI cases, a school record isn't hard to secure. Not when you killed Tobias Budge in 'self-defense'. Did you know they requested your file? Do you consider yourself a violent individual, and is that why you have entered a relationship with a psychiatrist noted for dealing with those of violent tendencies?"

Will goes very still. "I think I'd like you to leave now."

Lounds pretends to be disappointed. She slides a card into Will's shirt pocket and says, "I am ready to listen when you're ready to talk, Will. Dr Lecter is a complex person." She saunters off, her gaudy red curls bouncing with her gait.

Will shuts the door and digs out the card with revulsion. He is about to rip it up when he sees that she has put down her number and address, along with a comment: '*I only want a story. Others may not be as kind. Give Dr Lecter my regards.*'

He stuffs it back into his shirt. The last sentence sounds ominous.

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While he does not appreciate his Sunday being disrupted, Hannibal is fascinated by the ingenuity of the mushroom garden that has been uncovered.

"They were put into drug-induced comas," says Price. He looks shaken; he was removing a breathing tube from one victim's mouth when she grabbed him. She is already on her way to the hospital, but Hannibal doubts she will survive. Price takes a few deep breaths. "He was keeping them alive, feeding them intravenously. I may go off mushrooms for a bit."

"They are laid out so neatly," Zeller observes. "An organized mind."

"Do not gender the perpetrator yet, Agent Price." Hannibal nods. "It's a garden. They're being cultivated."

"The mushrooms?"

"Yes. People are fertilizer." Hannibal considers the thought process behind it. "Why mushrooms, though? It'd be easier to bury corpses and let them rot to enrich the soil."

Beverly Katz shakes her head. "He's not lazy."

"There is something about fungi that he or she admires," says Hannibal.

Price shrugs. "Tasty?"

"Fungi reproduce by spores, they don't need to be tasty," says Zeller. "There is no reproductive advantage to being tasty for fungi."

"Colorful? No, these are edible fungi." Katz stares at the macabre garden they have finished unearthing. There is a lot of evidence to process.

Jack folds his arms. "We need a profile, Dr Lecter. Now that we've disturbed this garden, will he or she look for more victims?"

"Likely. You will need to check the medical histories of the victims. My guess is that the perpetrator has connections with all of them, perhaps a semi-regular one; they share something in common." Hannibal straightens from his crouch where he is studying the mushrooms. "Connections. That will be the key."

"Why, Dr Lecter?" Jack asks.

"Mycelium mats. All the fungi is connected; our every move sends a signal to the system; there is nothing that is hidden. He or she is obsessed with connections. That is likely why they chose to cultivate mushrooms instead of plants, which would require less effort. They are lonely despite recognizing that they are linked to many people." Hannibal climbs away from the slope. "Once you isolate what ailment they have in common, you'll be able to locate the gardener."

Katz catches up to Hannibal before he goes. "Dr Lecter. Alana called, crying about you and Will. May I know what happened?"

Hannibal makes a moue of regret. "You may have to ask her why it happened at all, Beverly. The general gist is that she does not approve of Will and I being together."

"I don't either, just FYI." Katz's jaw twitches. "But it's not my place to dictate, is it?"

"No, it's not. Will and I are fully cognizant of the possible consequences when we decided to make our relationship known."

"Does Jack know?"

"Will and I were photographed," says Hannibal. "I'm certain Jack Crawford knows. But he is not my superior, and I am not beholden to the FBI. They can take away my consultant status if they disagree with my choices and I will feel no loss, other than, perhaps, the company of like-minded individuals."

Katz exhales heavily. "Yeah, but we'll feel your loss plain enough. Not enough good profilers out there."

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Hannibal never goes to his office. The Rolodex sits in his glove box as he drives back home, and briefly he considers throwing it away. It will not be missed, he tells himself.

He is sorely tempted.

He leaves it in the glove box.

When he reaches home, he seeks out Will, who has seated himself on the chaise longue, eyes closed. His hands dance as though they are at a piano, and Hannibal stays in the doorway, unwilling to interrupt Will's strange little exercise. Hannibal watches, and when he recognizes the fingering, listens to Will play *Für Elise* on the piano that isn't there.

The picture is achingly lovely. Russet-gold sunlight spills over Will, highlighting his hair and giving his skin an added luminosity; his hands, roughened with hard work yet elegant in their curves, waltz and tiptoe his fingers through the notes.

It is all about connections. He has finally found someone he believes he can connect to, someone who loves him. Loves *this version* of him. How long has it been since he allowed himself to feel anything stronger than a passing affection? He hates that he succumbed this easily to common sentiment, and yet craves the peace that Will brings him. Weighing his darker passions against this new, strange love, Hannibal finds himself torn.

One final feast, he tells himself. Mischa is gone; Will is here. He will sacrifice blood for bliss.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so glad there are so many comments! You guys are really engaged in this story and I'm humbled. However, I generally don't reply to questions, but I do try to supply answers in my writing. Probably when all 16 chapters are up, I'll get to answering whatever queries there are left. Thank you so much again for your suggestions, critique and encouragement!
I liked the story behind Tristan and Isolde, so I referred to it in some chapters earlier. However, when I checked how long the opera production for this is, I was shocked that it's around five hours (including two intermissions). The leitmotifs that Will refers to are here:
Longing and Desire
Glance
The e.e. cummings poem that Hannibal quotes is here; it's one of my favorites.
Für Elise

Chapter 11

"I've seen the photos," says Bedelia Du Maurier in her cool tone. Still immaculate, still serene, but there is the barest hint of curiosity and apprehension now that the Hannibal she faces now is different from the one she used to talk with. "He has the features of a classic English beauty."

"I shall convey your compliments."

The woman smiles and inclines her head. "What do you wish to talk about today, Hannibal?"

Hannibal doesn't miss a beat. "I've started an unconventional relationship with a much younger partner. I think we should talk about that."

"As you wish." Bedelia leans back in her chair. "Now that you have Will Graham as your partner, how do you feel?"

Hannibal smiles faintly. He can sense her trying to gauge him anew. He doesn't blame her. What he used to present in their sessions is gone; what he is now has yet to become. "I feel happy."

She returns the faint smile. "And what makes you happy, Hannibal?"

"He does," says Hannibal easily. "I am happy when he is near me. When I cook, he is in the kitchen as my sous chef. When I read, he is there beside me, reading his own. He is the first I see in the morning and the last before I sleep. That fact makes me unaccountably happy.“

"He has changed you."

"He has," Hannibal agrees. "Frequently I find myself in awe. So young a man, so simple his habits, so profound his influence. Now I find myself resenting my time away from him, even in sleep. I suppose this is the first flush of love. This entire relationship is a... paradigm shift. It's given new perspective on my life. Before Will, I thought I was living. Now I see I was existing."

Bedelia tilts her head and regards him. "Where do you see yourself and Will in five years?"

"Will would be in college, I suppose. We have not broached the topic. He still has half a year before he has to decide." Hannibal shifts and crosses his legs. "I will be here with my practice."

"But you have concerns?"

"I anticipate problems."

"Anticipation of problems may lead to actualization of such."

"He is very much younger," says Hannibal. "Someday I will be too old for him."

"You are not too old for him now," she points out.

"I am in my prime," says Hannibal factually. "But in ten, fifteen years, I shall be heading towards my decline, while Will grows into his own."

Bedelia narrows her lovely, inscrutable eyes. "You believe you and Will would be together for that long."

"I hope so. I am not above selfishness," Hannibal says. "I want him for the rest of my life."

"As do all those who fall in love. But if he should wish to leave you, would you let him?"

"Not without a fight."

"Fear of abandonment is a legitimate concern, particularly where there are expectations. What do you expect of Will?"

Hannibal mulls over the query. "I expect him to be true to himself. I expect him to move beyond survival. I expect him to flourish and thrive."

"Do your expectations of Will include his feelings for you?"

"People grow. People change."

"How have you changed?"

"In what ways have you noticed me changing?"

The woman's glacial calm does not thaw. "I think you find yourself more vulnerable now that you have allowed another into your life."

He hates that Bedelia has identified it. So many years ago, in the shadows and half-light, the pigs saw weakness and took advantage of it. He has not allowed himself to be vulnerable for a long time, and to have it laid out so starkly makes him feel like a failure all over again.

"Am I vulnerable?" he muses aloud.

"To love is to be open," says Bedelia. "If your walls are still up against Will Graham, perhaps you need to consider if what you feel for him truly can be called love."

"Tell me, Dr Du Maurier," says Hannibal carefully, holding on to his mask, "when was the last time you felt vulnerable?"

There is barely a glint of alarm in the woman's eyes, and she changes the subject.

Hannibal thinks he may need to find a new therapist.

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It is four days after their confrontation in the kitchen before Will texts Dr Bloom and asks if she's willing to meet him. He's thankful and nervous that she agrees. Hannibal only told him to be honest with her, and Will wonders how honest he is ready to be.

Her demeanor is cool but not icy; she thanks him for sending the message. They order lunch, Will feeling self-conscious that he's going to use his new supplementary card for the meal, and wait until their orders are served. Dr Bloom has a risotto, while Will has grilled salmon.

"I'm sorry for the way I said those things that day, Dr Bloom," says Will quietly. He needs to get that out of the way. "It was rude of me."

Dr Bloom sighs. "I was the one out of order. Barging into your home, shouting at Hannibal, and dismissing you. I'm sorry for that."

"So, um. Truce?"

"Truce," says Dr Bloom with a sweet but sad smile on her lovely lips. The chill seems to fade from the air. "But I agreed to this meeting for another reason. I'm concerned about you."

Will picks at his food. The fish is very tender. "May I know why?"

"I feel," she says, "that you don't have a life away from Hannibal. Don't get me wrong. He has been very responsible for you."

"You've been checking up on me, right?" Will smiles tightly. "I remember saying that it's okay for him to tell you things. He told me that, uh, you think of me as your charge."

"I do. He's been communicating with me with regards to your lessons and they are quite demanding and varied. You've also learned anger management techniques and, well, you didn't resort to violence that morning, so obviously there's been progress." She swirls her spoon in her risotto, as though weighing her words. "But the more I look at your relationship, the less healthy I think it is."

"What do you mean?"

"He's your tutor, your unofficial therapist, your employer of sorts, your... boyfriend. That seems a lot of roles for one man to play."

Will makes a face. "Hannibal being my boyfriend kind of erases a few of the other roles, Dr Bloom."

"I find it worrying that you have so few connections with people beyond Hannibal."

"Is this a therapy session?" Will bites off. He spears his salmon with a little more force than necessary. "If that's the case, I'd rather wait until dessert."

Dr Bloom sighs. "Do you even have a friend who isn't Hannibal?"

"I do. Mikolaj. He talks movies, I listen, and he gives me moral support when I need it. Does that satisfy you? Would you like to run him through some psych tests?" Will knows he

becomes rude when he's irritated.

She is unperturbed. "Only one friend, Will?"

"I don't *like* most people, Dr Bloom. I find it hard to socialize and make friends." Will takes another bite of his lunch. "Not with the abnormal stuff in my head and in my life."

"Do you consider yourself not normal?"

"I consider myself broken," Will states frankly. "Hannibal doesn't think so. That's his choice. But I am. And... and I always can tell what a person feels about me. Right now, for instance, you are feeling both curious about my statement and pity for my self-assessment."

"You are projecting."

Will laughs shortly. His gaze skim over the faces of the other patrons and then fall to the blue-and-green tiled floor of the restaurant. "It's not projection, Dr Bloom, but protection. Anyone who's had to learn the difference between a parent's good day and bad day from a single glance can tell you that." He stands up and pays at the counter. Dr Bloom does not follow him.

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Will's irritation carries him out into the chilly early November air. He strides all the way down the street, past stylish boutiques and cafes, and then ducks into a bookstore to find a distraction. There are a few customers browsing the shelves.

He is in the midst of choosing between buying a copy of Pratchett's latest offering - he wishes Hannibal would consider popular fiction sometimes - and Gaiman's *American Gods* when a store employee just behind him trips and spills a full box of illustrated paperbacks. Some are crumpled when the gangly young man lands on them.

"Damn it Matthew, can't you do anything right?" A manager hurries over and berates her staff in a shrill voice.

On impulse, Will says, "It wasn't his fault. I bumped into him."

"No, I-" Matthew is still frantically trying to put the books back in the box. "I-i-it w-w-w-" He stops and gulps, dull red creeping over his neck and face. His hair is trimmed short, so he can't hide behind it like Will used to.

The manager glares at the stuttering young man. "For God's sake, Matthew, stop stammering! W-w-w-w-what?" she mocks, her hands on her hips.

"It was an accident," Will interjects, stepping between the strident store manager and Matthew. "I'll pay for any damages."

"You'll pay," says the manager. She looks Will from top to boot.

He knows he's wearing his oldest clothes and hopes Hannibal won't mind him using his money to teach this woman a lesson. He sees her name tag. "Yes, Ella. For the contents of that box."

Both manager and employee gape at Will as he pulls out the credit card. "Come on. I don't have all day."

Manager Ella Chandling stays nearby as the cashier rings up the total. Will has to hide his panic when the total sum came up to nearly a thousand dollars. He has never had a thousand dollars before at any time, let alone spend it in one flourish. For a heartbeat he wishes he hasn't been so impulsive, but he sees Matthew lurking in the background and he smiles at the lanky guy.

"I'm gonna need help bringing this home," he says as he signs the receipt. His hand doesn't shake, which impresses himself. "Do you do deliveries?"

"Sure," says Ella, who is now all smiles and sunshine. "Lindy can-"

Will ignores her. "Matthew, right? Could you send me home with the books?"

"Uh," the other young man blushes and stares at his feet. "S-s-s-sure."

Ella isn't too certain about allowing Matthew to drive the company vehicle, but Matthew volunteers his own car. It is a beat-up red Honda, but it's clean on the inside, and Matthew is very polite.

"Thanks f-for helping me back there," he says slowly, taking care to enunciate, though he lisps his 's'. "It was very generous of you."

"I don't like seeing people bullied," says Will. "I know what it's like to be targeted." He gives Matthew the address.

Matthew smiles. He looks very handsome and shy when he does. "Y-you don't seem the type. To be bullied."

"And yet." Will regards Matthew, taking in the gentle demeanor. "I'm Will Graham."

"Matthew Brown." He glances at Will. "You're not in school?"

"I left." Will does not go into detail, and Matthew doesn't ask. "Is Ella always like that?"

"Y-es. She's m-my mom's girlfriend. So she kinda has to employ me." Matthew speaks very softly. "I don't think she likes me."

Will can feel Matthew's dejection; the other guy's hands clutch too tightly on the wheel, his words too carefully chosen. "Do you like her?"

"She m-makes mom happy." Matthew's answering smile is sad. "I'm saving up. To go away. Study."

"What do you wanna study?" To his own surprise, Will likes Matthew. The other young man seems as wounded as Will was before Hannibal; Will wonders what he can do to help. A small voice in the back of his minds adds sarcastically, *See Dr Bloom? I can make friends if I like them.*

Matthew flushes. "Nursing. I like to help p-eople. They should know that they're not alone wh-en they're sick."

"That's great. I hope you can go soon," says Will sincerely.

Will finds out that Matthew is eighteen, has a younger sister Esther, and a pet cat, which he's named Meatloaf. Will gets the feeling that very few people listen to Matthew, and pays close attention. Matthew seems to appreciate it.

They make the turn into Will's street. Matthew hums and then says, "You didn't mention m-my stutter."

"Should I have?" asks Will quietly.

"Thanks for... not." Matthew grins wryly. "The therapy helps. Except when I'm nervous."

He helps carry the box to the door.

"Hey, um. Matthew." Will scribbles his number on the receipt from lunch and hands it to the guy. "I don't, um, do this often. And I have a boyfriend, so I'm not, uh. Not... flirting. But if you wanna talk or, I dunno. Hang out. On your day off."

It's worth the awkwardness and embarrassment when Matthew lights up with a grin and gives Will his number in return. Will waves as Matthew drives off, and wonders why he had such difficulty making friends in the past.

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"... and now we have a box full of books on Renaissance art," says Will, hands clasped behind him and his gaze fixed on the ground as he relates the afternoon's events. He bites his lower lip. "Um. We could donate the undamaged copies to charity?"

Thankfully, Hannibal only chuckles. "I'm glad you don't balk at using my money for good deeds, Will."

"I won't do it again." Will peers up. "But I made a new friend. I think. So, um. I guess it's worth it."

"This Matthew," says Hannibal, brow creasing faintly as he reads Will's notes on the leitmotifs of *Tristan und Isolde*, "would he be interested in coming over for dinner?"

"I-I don't know. I could ask?"

Hannibal smiles fondly. "I would like to meet him myself."

Will rolls his eyes. "You're vetting my friend, aren't you."

Hannibal hums vaguely, not denying the accusation.

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He has studied many famous paintings, but Hannibal cannot picture a lovelier sight than Will Graham writhing in his arms while light from a fireplace dance over his damp skin.

"Tu es si beau, Will," Hannibal whispers as Will comes down from his climax. "Tu es mon rêve."

"I can't do French right now," Will slurs with a dreamy smile. He touches Hannibal's jaw, lips; pushes his finger in to touch Hannibal's tongue. "I love the way you speak French."

Hannibal cleans his hand on a hand towel and uses the same towel to clean Will up. "Then I shall teach you, and we will speak French together, mon amour."

"I know that," Will says fuzzily. He rolls over and snuggles into the doctor's chest, mouthing lazy kisses against Hannibal's skin. "It means 'my love'. Mon amour." He hitches his leg slightly, rubbing Hannibal's arousal against his thigh.

"Will, do not tempt me," Hannibal warns. His voice is thick, sounding very unlike himself.

Will only smiles in response and slides his hand into Hannibal's pants.

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It is three in the morning when Hannibal wakes up and finds Will gone.

Already the bed feels cold without the young man; Hannibal pulls on his robe and new slippers before going out in search of Will.

He finds the young man back in his room. At least he has put on some clothes; the room is cold. Will glances up when Hannibal pauses at the door.

"Sorry," says Will. "Did I wake you?"

"Your absence did." Hannibal's lips curve gently and he comes into the room, settling onto the mattress behind Will. "Why are you awake at this hour?"

"I dreamed about Dad." Turning a crumpled piece of paper over, Will leans into his lover's solid frame. He swallows audibly. "I just... I just wished I had time to tell him, you know? Or if there was some way to- But if he hadn't died, I wouldn't have had this. Wouldn't have had you."

"What happened in your dream?"

Will chuckles, but there is no delight in the sound. "I dreamed of the one perfect day my dad and I shared."

The way Will phrases his answer makes Hannibal frown. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

"A picture's worth a thousand words." Will turns over the piece of paper and shows Hannibal a photograph of when Will must have been five or six years old, chubby-cheeked and bright-eyed but with the same wild mop of curls. He held in one hand a child-sized fishing rod and in the other his prize: a small bass that was just larger than Will's hand. Child Will grinned as though he'd landed a marlin. Dave Graham was crouching next to him, with a huge, proud smile.

Hannibal extends a finger and brushes over the image of his Will as a child. He wishes he could have seen this version, but given what he intends to do with Will in bed perhaps it's best not to dwell upon it. "You looked cute."

"I was five, I think. Dad took me out to this stream with... I think it was his friend, or maybe a neighbor. It was so pretty. I remember dragonflies," says Will, his voice quiet and wistful. "I think that was my first catch."

Hannibal wraps his arms around Will's middle and rests his chin on Will's shoulder lightly. Will relaxes further into his hold.

"It just... Dr Bloom said something about being normal. Well, not really. She asked if I considered myself not normal. I guess I got to thinking." Will puts the photo on the bed, image side down. "And the thing is, my 'normal' sucks. My reference point is... What others consider normal, like going to school, and coming home, and doing homework and chores and having dinner... That's a good day in my family."

"Tell me more," Hannibal whispers. He tries not to sound too inquisitive, but he yearns to know. He wants all of Will Graham, his darkest pains and most lurid secrets, to paint in the shadows of his memory palace.

Will shifts so he can look at Hannibal. "You won't leave me, right?" he asks.

"You gave me the moon, mon amour, I would never part with you."

Sighing, Will turns in Hannibal's arms, pressing his brow into the side of Hannibal's jaw. "Mom left dad. Not long after I was born. Dad doesn't talk about her much, but she... I look like her. I think that's why he started drinking. So, um. Yeah. I learned to navigate my dad's moods before I even learned how to tie my shoes."

He pauses and tries not to sink into self-pity. "I love him. But these days, the more I think about Dad, the angrier I get. I was a kid, but I never really got to be one. Can you guess the last time I made a birthday wish?"

Hannibal laces his fingers with Will's and says nothing.

"I was seven. My birthday. And it seemed like a good day, you know, and Dad got a cupcake and stuck a candle in it and everything. And I made a wish, because that's what you're supposed to do," says Will. His voice drops even further; Hannibal feels like they are in a confessional booth. "I made the mistake of telling my dad that I wished for mom to come back. I've never made a wish since."

"What did he do, Will?"

"Belt. I didn't even dare to scream, because I could see how upset he was. I was crying, I was crying so hard not just 'cause of the pain, but because Daddy was *anguished*. The bruising was so bad that he kept me from school for a week, until the bruises mostly faded." Will flinches. "Hannibal, you're hurting me."

Hannibal relaxes his fingers immediately. "I'm sorry. I'm... I feel angry."

"Don't. Please don't be." Will inhales sharply and his voice shakes. "I need you to- I need you to be my anchor. I can't."

With Will trembling in his arms, Hannibal takes a long, deep breath and exhales. "Tell me everything, Will."

"Same story, different settings. It got worse as time went on. More bad days than good. And sometimes there are stretches of good days, and I'd get so *hopeful*-" Will tapers off. "I was nine when he bartered some handyman services for ten piano lessons. Every time I sat down at the piano I learned everything. I was so scared that each time would be the last. I never stopped practicing even after it ended. Just... I just kept going over the exercises and books that Mr Francis gave me."

Hannibal caresses Will's arms, willing him to go on.

"One afternoon I came home from school and they were gone. Like they never existed. I was so mad at Dad, and he was... he was cooking when I asked him why we were having mac and cheese for the fifth time, and I just-" The tears break through Will's control. "I can't do this, Hannibal. I wish I could hate Dad, but I can't. I know he tried, he really did, but. Something was wrong that day. He was so *angry*, and I don't even know why."

A sick feeling creeps over Hannibal. "Will, did you get burned that day?"

"I can't look at mac and cheese without feeling nauseous," Will says through his tears, confirming Hannibal's suspicion. "I screamed, I did scream this time, but no one came. No one came, Hannibal. No one even thought- And later, Dad bathed the wound and then carried me to hospital because his car was out of gas and I couldn't tell them it was my dad, I couldn't, they would've taken him away and I'd have no one."

The doctor holds Will tightly and lets the young man vent. His heart breaks with every word spilling from Will's lips.

"Bad days. Good days. I've never... I don't know how to live a normal day until I came to you. I'm supposed to be a teen, supposed to be doing stupid things. I don't know how to do that. I

dunno how to be a kid. And now I'm in love, with you, and they're trying to sabotage my feelings for you." He covers his face, his breaths coming in wet, choking gasps. "Why can't I just be happy and in love? Why do they have to ask me questions, make me doubt all this?"

"They?" Hannibal asks.

"Dr Bloom. Freddie Lounds. Your friends. I don't know, Hannibal. I'm too young, too anti-social, too alone. Too reliant on you. I'm not supposed to care about their comments, but I do, and they hurt. We've been together less than a month and I keep feeling as though I'm being judged for being happy. Like I'm not supposed to be after Dad died. But he did, and part of me is really glad he did, and I know that's really wrong-" Will inhales sharply. "I'm not normal. I don't even know what normal is. My good normal involves being ignored by my father until it's time for dinner, and that's the time he tries to be a dad. My bad normal meant a new bruise or scar. I don't want normal."

Hannibal soothes Will, rocking him gently until he calms down. "I'll talk to Alana. She means well, but she needs to back off. When did Freddie Lounds approach you?"

"A few days ago." Will wipes his face with the tee he's wearing. "She had my school records. And she said some horrible things about you. Like you had patients die under your care or after. That you had violent patients. And she hinted that it's why I'm with you, because I'm some kinda violent kid. I think she wants to discredit you, like she doesn't trust you."

"While I do not require her trust to do my job," says Hannibal, "her getting your school records is a serious breach of privacy. I will deal with her."

"I don't want you getting into trouble, Hannibal," Will says. His lashes are sticky with tears.

Hannibal kisses his lover. "Don't worry."

While he enjoys her lurid articles on his work, Freddie Lounds has chosen the wrong target. Hannibal mentally marks her as the first course of the feast to come.

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Alana is told, firmly and politely, to stop analyzing Will; she apologizes, but both Hannibal and Alana understood then that their formerly warm friendship is over. It is saddening for Hannibal to lose that relationship, but her constant prodding of the young man destabilizes him more than helps. As for Freddie Lounds, Hannibal informs Jack about her ambush of Will and her having access to supposedly sealed records. The doctor also sends his lawyers to warn her off Will, or she'll be facing a lawsuit about purloined documents.

Once the show of going through the right channels have been made, Hannibal has to decide when he will gather his ingredients for his dinner party. It is early yet; he has decided to have a Christmas feast, something to represent each day of Christmas. It'll be after Mrs Komeda's benefit also, which allows his guests to talk to Will about something that Will undoubtedly enjoys.

Will is spending the weekend with Mikolaj; apparently Will agreed to watch some movies with the older boy in exchange for Mikolaj's presence at the opera. Hannibal doesn't begrudge him the time away. After he drops Will at the Komeda estate, he goes in search of Robert Ashton. Facebook and Instagram have their uses.

He waits for Ashton to leave his latest prowling ground - a party at some nouveau riche household, replete with too many teenagers and bad music.at nearly midnight, he sees the young man swagger out, a girl tucked against his side. Hannibal's lip curls as Ashton drives off, loud and too fast. The doctor counts to ten before he follows. It's not difficult to guess where Ashton is headed, and true enough he drives the girl to a secluded spot in the woods. Hannibal stops his car and follows on foot.

Ashton's car is rocking faintly, and the windows are steaming up. A hand smears the glass and gives Hannibal an idea how they are positioned.

He waits.

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It is not art, what he does to Robert Ashton. The girl was knocked out and her body is currently locked in the trunk of her car; Ashton, on the other hand, is currently gagged and bound in Hannibal's car and being driven to Will's former house.

Hannibal chooses to secure Ashton to where Dave Graham was murdered. It will be cathartic, Hannibal thinks, to work out his frustrations on a surrogate, since he can't kill Will's father himself for inflicting so much pain on his beautiful boy.

It takes some time to fillet his flesh. The dogs are eager things, gobbling up the offerings tossed at them while the human waste screams and screams into his gag. Hannibal does not let him faint; adrenaline shots keep his heart going. Finally, exhausting his store of fury, Hannibal eviscerates what's left of Handsome Rob with a knife he finds in the kitchen. It's meant to gut fish, not pigs, but it does a fine job nonetheless. The dogs circle around, as though uncertain if they are allowed this delicacy.

When Hannibal steps away, the dogs pounce.

Making sure to enter only by the front door, Hannibal rinses the knife clean with the bleach he finds under the narrow sink and replaces it. By the time he leaves, the dogs are already howling and yapping wildly, processing Ashton's drug-addled flesh through their canine systems.

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The couple gets a week's reprieve. With the lack of criticism, Will is more relaxed, and Hannibal risks inviting Jack and Bella over for dinner. With Bella around, Jack restrains his natural didactic approach. Instead, the head of the BSU shares the story of how he met his wife.

Bella, for all that she is battling a pernicious cancer, is as gracious and beautiful as she has ever been. She speaks kindly to Will, and once they establish that they both enjoy satirical and fantasy fiction, they hit it off.

"I don't have to tell you that you are not the Bureau's favorite person at the moment, not with the publicity stunt you pulled," says Jack. "Also, Dr Bloom doesn't want me to share this, but Abigail Hobbs has been fixating on Will. Apparently, she blames him for her father's death."

"I was the one who killed him," says Hannibal quietly, while on the other side of the room, Bella listens to Will wax enthusiastically about Neil Gaiman. "Should I be concerned?"

"Abigail has also been talking to Freddie Lounds."

"I should be concerned then."

Jack sighs. "I'm not going to pretend that your relationship makes any sense to me, but since there is nothing I can do about it and it does not affect your consulting work with us, I shall ignore its existence."

Hannibal barely hides the sneer from his voice. "How magnanimous of you, Jack."

"I'm not the one with the lover young enough to be his son, Hannibal. I've heard worse names being bantered around, for either of you, and I'm doing my best to shut these mouths up. But you must be above reproach." Jack sips his wine slowly. "I won't have my cases jeopardized because you were too besotted."

The doctor is about to comment when Jack's phone rings. The agent apologizes and answers it. His stoic face becomes stone-like.

"Where is he now?" he barks into the phone. The answer must have satisfied him; he turns off his phone and says, "I'm sorry about that. Bella, we have to go. Dr Lecter, thank you for dinner."

"What happened?" Hannibal asks as the Crawfords put on their coats.

Jack waits until Bella is outside the door. "Abel Gideon just killed three people."

Chapter 12

Chilton is all but preening under the attention as the forensic investigators scour the scene at the hospital where Gideon was sent in for treatment.

"I told you, Gideon is the Chesapeake Ripper. He's in a cell now under full surveillance. The attack was unprovoked and unexpected, and obviously we will be more cautious now that we know his propensity for savagery."

"We had a case a few weeks ago that bore the hallmarks of the Ripper, Dr Chilton," says Jack, sharp and domineering. "Abel Gideon cannot be the Ripper if the RIpper is still killing outside of this facility."

For an instant Hannibal cannot remember which kill Jack is talking about, and then remembers Jerry Arness.

"Look at what he did to the nurse," Chilton insists. "He popped her eyes out of their sockets and cut her open!"

"Jack is right. Gideon is not the Ripper, the one who killed the other man - what was his name? - was." Hannibal tamps down the ruffled pride within. Jack and Chilton both look over at where he stands in the doorway. "There is artistry in the Ripper's kills. Butchery to elevate. This carnage is... mimicry. He had no vision to execute. It's as though he's heard what the Ripper does and is trying to recreate it through a flawed lens."

He then turns to face Chilton and Jack Crawford. "I profiled Abel Gideon after he murdered his wife. The man who killed the guards and the nurse is not the same man we sent in here. Something or someone distorted the lens through which he views himself."

Chilton turns an interesting shade of puce. "What are you accusing me of?"

"Is there something to accuse, Dr Chilton?" Jack inquires with a growl. "Dr Lecter, what is your professional opinion on how to approach this?"

"He's *guilty*," says Chilton loudly and petulantly. "He's caught on *camera*."

Jack and Hannibal ignore him.

"He will be moved from lockup to the hospital, yes?" Hannibal asks. "I'd suggest doubling the guard in transport. He may believe he is the Chesapeake Ripper and act in the same belief."

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'As the psychiatrist whose profile of Dr Abel Gideon had led to the latter's swift capture, Dr Hannibal Lecter (top left) has once again been dragged into the investigation of Gideon's recent murders. While there is no doubt as to Gideon's culpability, one must question if Dr Lecter is suited to his role as a consultant, given his highly controversial romance with the barely-legal 17-year-old Will Graham-'

"The fuck is she trying to do?" Will snarls and shuts the window on the tablet. "Why is she on this tack *again*? Shouldn't she be reporting on the actual murders that just happened yesterday?"

Hannibal looks at Will reproachfully. "Language, Will."

"Sorry. But Hannibal, she's a serious pain in the neck."

"Alas, freedom of the press allows her to *speculate*," says Hannibal, the last word barely emphasized. "Don't worry, Will, she cannot do more than that."

Will fumes, even after Hannibal serves up bacon and mushroom crepes, but the doctor kisses the young man until Will is smiling and panting lightly.

"Mm. Better than coffee," Hannibal teases. "I have three books reserved at Gellers. Could you pick that up for me with the dry-cleaning?"

"Sure. You said we needed fingerling potatoes?"

"That would be good, and a dozen eggs. There are only two left." Hannibal skims through the TattleCrime article and shakes his head. "The state of journalism is severely in decline."

Will steals Hannibal's coffee. "If you'd stop contributing to her page hits..."

"I like to know the enemy. And you know how to work the coffee machine, go make your own," Hannibal says, faking a severe glare as he retrieves his cup.

"Your coffeemaker is scary," Will tells his lover, and hops off his counter stool. They have been together for a month and a half now, and Will still thrills inwardly over their domesticity. "I'm gonna head to Mrs Komeda's first, then the library, and I'll meet you at your office after I pick up the suits and groceries?"

The older man tugs Will close by his belt loops. "Cabs, mon amour, are perfectly appropriate transportation."

He catches Hannibal's lower lip with his teeth and sucks on it. "I was thinking of getting to know your office a little better."

Hannibal looks mildly scandalized at his suggestion. "I *work* there, Will Graham."

"Don't pretend like you've never thought about it," Will says with a soft laugh. He's not altogether against the idea of groping in Hannibal's office, getting each other off on a couch. Or maybe Hannibal may want to give him a blowjob against that ladder. "I've seen the way

you look at me when I'm at the desk. Besides, I could leave some positive vibes for the times when your patients are dull and boring."

He likes this casual intimacy between them. He's also being plagued with thoughts about getting his mouth on Hannibal. Almost every night, Hannibal would use his surgeon's hands or sinfully sensitive tongue and lips on Will, but Will hasn't reciprocated beyond hand jobs. He's getting more and more curious as to how Hannibal will taste, hot and heavy inside his mouth, and how his lover will sound. So maybe the blowjob he has in mind is more of him on his knees, while Hannibal is braced against that ladder.

As if reading the images flicking through Will's mind, Hannibal slides his hand lower and squeezes Will's ass. "I am very professional," he murmurs against Will's mouth. "But for you, I shall make an exception. I'll pen you in for my last appointment for the day then, mon rêve. Five fifteen, don't be late."

*****

Will plays the pieces he's chosen for Mrs Komeda's benefit, testing the flow and pace. Mrs Komeda is there too, tea set up near the piano as she listens to the young man practice.

"Something more upbeat for the third, perhaps?" she suggests when Will pauses. "Metamorphosis is lovely, but so plodding sometimes. Take that out, make it two jazz classics, and it'll be perfect."

"As you wish," says Will.

The woman giggles. "You sound like Hannibal," she coos. "Anyway, I've received his invitation. The twenty-second, hmm? I'm turning down a party at the Wyndham-Stones for him, just so you know."

"Mrs Komeda, you're the one who asked him to hold a dinner party," Will points out with a smile.

She waves it aside, languid and casual. Her gaze turns shrewd. "What are you getting him for Christmas, darling?"

Will chokes. He dabs at his lips. "Um. I haven't... I didn't think about that," he says lamely. Then panic set in. "Oh god. What do I get him? I'm using his money. I can't get him a gift with his money!"

"Will, relax," Mrs Komeda commands. She waits until Will calms down. "I'm assuming sex is not an option any longer, given how he looks at you every-" She pauses, and then laughs in delight. "You've *not* slept together yet? After, what, six weeks? Oh my goodness, you are so *precious!* Ugh, I can't talk about this with the girls! Why did I even- You really haven't?"

Already completely mortified, Will buries his face in his hands. "Mrs Komeda, please. I can't- Oh my god, Hannibal's gonna kill me."

"Darling, no need to be shy about this," the woman trills. "How has he resisted? If I were a few decades younger, I wouldn't be able to keep my hands off you!" She chuckles again and adds, "There you go. Hannibal's Christmas present is getting to *have* you. I am going to have so much fun at the party! Good lord, he has the patience and self-control of a saint."

"I... don't think that's, um. I-I'll think about it."

"You do still have a month," says Mrs Komeda brightly. "In any case, I'm really looking forward to the twenty-second now."

*****

Beverly Katz comes to his office at half-past four, just after Margot has left. Hannibal tidies up and puts away Margot's file.

"I wasn't expecting you," he says.

"We couldn't get through on your phone. Jack sent me." Katz looks solemn. "Gideon escaped in transit. The alarm was raised when the vehicle never arrived on time. He killed two guards and a driver and strung up their insides. Jack wants you to take a look."

Hannibal looks at his appointment book. Margot was the last of the day; Will isn't due until five. Still, no telling how far he will need to travel to the crime scene.

He excuses himself and calls Will, who answers on the third ring.

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"Oh. All right then, I'll see you at home." Will doesn't mention how he's already on the way over on the bus. He still can't bring himself to take cabs. On a bus, he can avoid eye contact and just focus on his phone or book. In a cab, there's no place to run if the cabbie wants to talk.

He sighs and alights, ready to cross the road and take a different bus home, when he sees Freddie Lounds getting out of her car.

The article he read that morning comes back to him. He grits his teeth and tries to ignore her existence, but she notices him anyway.

"Will!" she says loudly as she jogs over. "How lovely to see you. Where's your scarily possessive boyfriend?"

"We're not friends, Miss Lounds, so please don't use my name like that." Will shoulders the dry-cleaning and crosses the road.

The redhead follows. "Abigail Hobbs wants to talk with you. Did you know about that?"

"Not interested."

"How about the part where your Dr Hannibal Lecter sent his lawyers after me?"

"That was a good thing he did."

"Have you fucked?"

Will swivels on his heel and she almost collides into him. He takes calming breaths. "Miss Lounds, that was inappropriate and crude."

She grins like a jackal. "You sound like him. Did you know that? Would you say he's becoming the primary influence in your life?"

"What do you *want*, Lounds? I'm sure there are actual stories for you to write about." Will rolls his eyes and turns away again, but to his surprise she grabs his arm and yanks him aside into a sheltered parking lot.

She looks deadly serious. "How well do you know Hannibal Lecter?"

"How is that your business?"

"It is, because the more I look into his past the murkier it becomes. I am good at my job, Will, very good. I can dig up *anything*. But there's nothing I can find on Lecter. I'm hoping you can enlighten me. In my experience, when I can't locate something, then someone's taken a lot of pains to hide it. And I wonder what's in the pot at the end of the rainbow."

"Why should I even entertain you? So that you can discredit him further? He's saving lives doing what he does. You just want to be noticed."

Freddie Lounds does not look ashamed. "Or maybe I'm trying to unmask a dangerous and unethical doctor."

That pisses Will off. "You don't really care about the lives you ruin, do you? You take information and twist it into some half-truth. You don't give a fuck about how it messes with people's lives."

"You'll come to me," Lounds promises darkly, and flounces off.

"Maybe after you burn in hell!" Will shouts at her retreating figure. If his hands aren't occupied with the suits and groceries, they would be shaking. He is seething and does not notice the man coming up behind him.

"Was that Freddie Lounds?" the stranger asks in a lazy drawl.

Will nearly trips when he turns around swiftly. "Uh, I-I didn't see you."

"I wasn't going to interrupt. I didn't mean to eavesdrop," says the man. "And you're Will Graham, Dr Lecter's... boyfriend."

"Who are you?" Will asks, feeling a chill creep over his skin when he catches a glimpse of the other man's eyes.

Confusion. Rage. Loss. Determination. Confusion.

The man draws out a gun from behind him. "I'm Dr Abel Gideon. I need an assistant. You're lucky. I was going to follow Miss Lounds, but your connection with Hannibal Lecter makes you an adequate stand-in. Come with me please."

"A-are you going to kill me?"

"Hmmm. I don't know yet. It depends on whether you cooperate." Gideon frowns and purses his lips. "You're clever. Not shouting. Yes, I'd have shot you. Come along, daylight's almost done now."

*****

"Well, first pass says nothing's missing," Zeller says brusquely. "Dismembered and disemboweled, but the major organs are present and accounted for. We might have missed something small, of course."

Hannibal shakes his head. "They're not taken. He's sending a message."

"To the Ripper?" asks Jack. Always about the Ripper.

Hannibal says nothing. They are still at the crime scene, and it is getting dark.

He sees the scene and feels nothing for it. He wishes Gideon had an ounce of creativity. After the totem pole of victims and the mushroom garden, Hannibal finds the draped intestines commonplace and mundane. They are not even put together artistically as a Christmas offering. Gideon disemboweled his victims and strew the innards around haphazardly, like a child with a tantrum.

Dull.

"He has the vehicle," says Zeller. "We're waiting on the APB."

"He's probably switched vehicles already. This escape was planned. Abel Gideon wants something." Hannibal examines the jagged edges of one guard's wound. Clumsy. Gideon must have hesitated in the middle of ripping him apart.

He wants to face me. See if he's really the Chesapeake Ripper.

Hannibal feels a delicious hunger rouse within his gut. It is a terrible thing for an identity to be taken from a person.

At that moment, Hannibal's cell phone rings. It's Will. "Hello, Will?"

"Dr Lecter. It has been so long. I shan't play games. I have him. Come get him." The call ends.

Hannibal stands frozen. Then he looks at the call history again - it is Will - but the voice is not.

"Something wrong, doc?" Price asks.

Hannibal wonders if he can flay and disembowel Abel Gideon in full view of the FBI. But time is of the essence; he needs their resources. "Gideon has Will."

*****

Will is not panicking. He's doing a fantastic job of that. He's not sure how long he can keep it going though.

Gideon is humming to himself. He has a pleasant flow to his voice, which makes sense - the man was a doctor, after all. A successful one.

"This," he tells Will, "is a respirator. You're responsible for his life now. I want you to watch what I do and when they come to get you, you are to tell them that Chilton deserves this exploration for his... similar activities in my brain. He's my first example."

"What has he done to you?" WIll asks. His mouth is very dry. He has to fight not to look at Chilton, bound to the table and desperately trying to free himself. "I mean, if you're okay with sharing."

The man tilts his head. "I killed my wife, I know that. But somehow, over the past year, I'm repeatedly persuaded that she's not the first. And... part of me believes that. Part of me thinks that I have practiced the science of murder before I cut her open." He licks his lips and frowns. "And another part of me is thoroughly convinced that she was the first. And occasionally, I fancy myself the Chesapeake Ripper, which is strange. If I were the Ripper, I ought to know, wouldn't I?"

Will nods.

Gideon smiles. "I like you, Will Graham. You're very sensible. What do you think? Do you think I'm the Ripper?"

"I wouldn't know, Dr Gideon," says Will. "I don't know what the Ripper does. I don't know what you did, or what you intend to do."

"I intend to show the good Dr Chilton how it feels to have people rummaging inside you," says Gideon. He whistles as he makes the first incision.

Will keeps the respirator going, not daring to meet Chilton's eyes, trying to block out the muffled scream.

Gideon asks, "So you're dating Dr Lecter. What is that like, being in an intimate relationship with a psychiatrist?"

"He doesn't try to psychoanalyze me, so I guess it's good."

"He does analyze you, he just doesn't tell you about it. Which is good, he's considerate of your feelings."

The sickly wet sound of meat parting should make Will want to gag. He doesn't. The smell is overpowering though, and Will keeps his breathing shallow, which makes him rather

lightheaded. "He is. He's very patient."

"A patient doctor," Gideon says with a smile. "Funny. He's the one that got me locked up, did you know?"

"There was a mention in Lounds' article."

The man's lips curl in a sneer. "He helped them catch me, but he never came to see me. I appreciated that, which is why you are currently my assistant and not my patient."

Will stammers a thank-you.

"Frederick," Gideon says in a sing-song tone, "see? This is what good manners are. Not poking around where you don't belong. You know, you have a wondrous chance here to judge the conditions of your own body, and you're already close to passing out." He jabs a needle into Chilton's thigh, and Will can literally *see* Chilton's heart jolt. Gideon murmurs conspiratorially, "Adrenaline."

*****

The call was made from Will's cell, which when they trace to the nearest tower, puts them in an industrial estate. Most are occupied, so Hannibal rules them out. The map of the area is far too small on the laptop and the doctor snarls with frustration and worry. Katz is good, though, suggesting that the warehouses on the edges of the district are likely locations.

They find a dark blue sedan with Hannibal's dry-cleaning and a paper bag of groceries on the passenger seat. Jack gets them in position. Hannibal lets his rage pass from him, from fire to ice. On Jack's signal, the agents move in. Hannibal does not wait outside as he is told; he trails Katz, his preternaturally sensitive sense of smell picking out fresher air, paths which has been disturbed. The scent of blood intensifies and he moves ahead of the agent.

"Dr Lecter!" she hisses at him.

He prowls on.

If Gideon hurts him -

- if Will is hurt -

- if Will is ***dead*** *-*

Hannibal stops in front of a door marked 'Operations Control'. Katz pushes him aside and kicks in the door, her gun cocked and ready.

Will is standing there, pumping a respirator for a man on the slab whose insides are now open and exposed. The smell of blood and raw flesh fills the room. Hannibal's relief hits him like a concrete slab to the gut. His knees nearly buckle and he has to hold on to the doorway for support, while Katz appraises the rest of the team of the situation.

"He's gone," Will says bleakly. "I-I-I can't, I can't stop. He'll die if I stop."

"Get the EMTs," Hannibal instructs, snapping out of his daze. He hurries over, his years as ER surgeon returning to aid him in ensuring that the victim does not die. Now Hannibal sees that it is Chilton who has been operated on, and from the looks of it Gideon has had some fun. Will has been keeping the man alive, but soon Chilton will go into shock and the chances of survival will be slim. Hannibal cares little for the incompetent psychiatrist laid bare before him, but the pallor of Will's face worries Hannibal exceedingly.

*I will **skin** Gideon while he watches.* Hannibal keeps his thought private, but allows the worry to show. Will is shaking, not too badly, but despite the smell of Chilton's innards Hannibal can still scent the stress emanating off of the young man. However, Hannibal waits until the EMTs come in and take over the task of saving Chilton before he leads Will out from the room.

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The young man cannot stop trembling, even after Price manages to find him a hot cup of terrible vending machine coffee. It's obvious that he is dealing with shock.

So is Hannibal. For the first time in a very, very long time, Hannibal's hands are trembling. He cups Will's face, stares into dimming blue eyes, and then pulls Will into his arms with a sound close to a sob. His fingers claw into Will's coat, as though terrified that he'll be torn away from Hannibal. He can almost taste the scream in his throat.

"I nearly lost you," he whispers harshly into dark curls.

Will clings to Hannibal and buries his face into the older man's neck. His breath is hot, and his grip so tight as to be nearly suffocating, but Hannibal feels the relief and reassurance pouring from his Will.

"I'm still here," he tells Hannibal, fervent and desperate. "I'm here. I'm safe."

Of course, Jack Crawford has to come over and demand Will to recount everything that happens. The look that Hannibal sends over his shoulder actually sends Jack taking a step back.

Katz, who is behind her boss, visibly recoils from the warning in Hannibal's eyes. "Jack, maybe we should give them a few minutes."

"It's okay, Beverly," says Will. He sounds young and tired. "Let's get it over with."

"You don't-" Hannibal starts, but Will just smiles faintly at him.

In deference to Hannibal's hovering protectiveness, Jack allows Beverly to do the questioning, prompting only when necessary. Will keeps his account short and to the point; the part about Freddie Lounds brings identical snarls of irritation to both agents, and an irritated huff from Hannibal.

Will adds at the end, "I keep getting the sense that he's, um, he's really angry and lost, even though he never raised his voice. He's all calm and... Like the calm before a really bad

storm."

Jack narrows his eyes. "He's angry? Why would he be angry?"

"He thinks... he thinks he's someone else, the Chesapeake Ripper, and yet he knows he isn't. He's confused, and mad about being confused," Will says, half lost in thought. His hands are freezing cold. Hannibal pulls off his own gloves and puts them on Will, ignoring his thin protests. "He's gonna hurt more people, he wants to kill the people who put him in that state. He said Chilton's the first, and that means, that must mean there's a second, right?"

"Many of my colleagues have tried to study him," Hannibal remarks. "You will need a list of those who have interviewed him, especially those who have done so more than once. Alana Bloom would be one of them."

Jack nods. "All right, once you send Will home, you can join us at-"

"I will do nothing of that sort," says Hannibal peremptorily, his arms now circling Will's shoulders as the young man rests against Hannibal's hip. "I am not an agent for you to chivy around, Jack, I am a consultant. I have consulted. I'd appreciate if you set up guard duty for my home and for Alana."

Will makes a distressed noise. "Someone should call Dr Bloom, let her know."

"I will," says Katz, and steps away to do so immediately. "I'll have her come to my place, and get a couple of uniforms over on protection detail."

"Dr Lecter," Jack says, "Gideon is still out there. He's going to kill again."

"So he will, unless you catch him." Hannibal lets go of Will and the young man slides his legs into the car. Once the door is shut, Hannibal turns to face Jack. "That, however, is not my concern. Agent Crawford, consider this the termination of my consultation services with the FBI."

"Excuse me?" The man raises his voice. His team, already busying themselves with retrieving evidence, glance over, but do not dare to intrude.

"Twice we have come close to death because of my work with you," says Hannibal. "I will not put him through that again."

"People's lives are in danger, Dr Lecter," says Jack loudly, as if by volume he can erase Hannibal's decision. "People are dying!"

"People die every day," Hannibal replies, as close to snapping as he ever gets. "And there are other psychiatrists you can refer to. I only have one Will Graham. I will not risk him."

He leaves Jack gawping as they drive home.

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Will can sense his terror and panic, balled up tight and compact in a corner of his mind, waiting to unfurl and pounce. His hands are warm, cocooned in Hannibal's gloves and trapped heat. He had to take off his own when he kept fumbling the pump for the respirator, and didn't remember to put them on again when he was led from the room. The trudge up the few steps inside feels dreamlike. He thinks that perhaps he is still there in the little room, Gideon has shot him, and he's actually bleeding out and hallucinating all that's happened since.

They make it into the bedroom, Hannibal's hand on the small of his back, when Will suddenly rushes to the bathroom and vomits into the toilet. His eyes sting with tears from the violent expulsion from his stomach. The doctor comes in and sits beside him, soothing Will's back, even as Will lurches and throws up again. It is a moment before Will collects himself enough to flush and then wash his face and rinse out his mouth.

"Sorry," he says to his lover, "I think I'll miss dinner tonight."

Hannibal runs his fingers through sweat-damp hair. "I have no appetite either."

"The worst thing was that I was talking to him throughout," Will says hoarsely, not looking in the mirror or at Hannibal. "An actual conversation. Like we were just... just at a meal. And he complimented me. And you. It was so... It was so mundane. But between us was Dr Chilton being opened up-" He squeezes his eyes shut. He can still smell the room, with its bloody, meaty scent, like it has coated his lungs.

Hannibal is behind him, reassuring warmth pressed along Will's back. Will grips Hannibal's forearms and let his head lean back. Then he starts laughing. It is either that or screaming.

"I don't know if God wants us to be together or not," Will says. He tries to sound amused, but comes off nearly hysterical. "We keep *nearly dying*, and we keep saving each other. First Hobbs, then Mr Budge, now Gideon. How many times must this happen-" The laughter chokes off and Will draws breath sharply, as though to cut off his train of thought. "When Gideon pointed the gun at me, all I could think of was, '*Hannibal's going to be so upset*'."

"I fear that would be an understatement, Will," Hannibal whispers. His embrace tightens.

Will presses a kiss to Hannibal's cheek. "If I'd died-"

"No. No, we shall not consider that." He kisses Will with a passion bordering frenzy, and begins pulling off clothes from the young man.

"I kept thinking of you," says Will, lips and teeth attacking Hannibal, "of you grieving, and I wanted only to stay alive because I'd never hurt you, never-"

Hannibal's teeth are sharp as they sink into the juncture of Will's neck and shoulder. Will surges into the pain and moans. "No, don't even think of it, mon amour, I will not lose you, not after we have found each other."

"We found each other," Will echoes when his mouth isn't otherwise occupied. He tugs impatiently at Hannibal's clothes. A button or two pops off in his haste, but Will ignores the

damage. He needs Hannibal now, a primal need to feel flesh and blood and joining. He needs to feel real again, to feel present, that he has not caused Hannibal to grieve.

They are less kissing than they are attacking, their lips and teeth clashing together as they try to strip the other without losing skin contact. Eventually, with a growl, Hannibal pins Will to a wall and yanks the young man's belt and jeans off, along with one sock. Will toes the other sock away, his hands too busy with navigating the psychiatrist's belt buckle, and it is with some help from Hannibal that they are both finally naked.

Usually Hannibal's actions are gentle and patient, but now he clutches Will to himself with a dizzying hunger that drowns Will's brain into static. Will discovers how strong his lover is when he is lifted and braced against the wall, both his legs wrapped about Hannibal's waist, with the doctor's hands digging into the back of his thighs to keep him up. Hannibal licks and sucks on Will's neck, pulling high keening noises from his young lover.

"Want you," Will gasps. His fingers scratch into Hannibal's hair. "God, *I want you*."

Will can feel Hannibal's erect cock brushing over the cleft of his ass, and while the idea of penetration used to make him nervous, he feels a burning ache inside to make sure that Hannibal is really here, and that they belong together. The older man groans and sets Will down. His hair is in disarray and his lips swollen with kissing.

"Shower," Hannibal says, his accent thick. Will feels his desire spike further and grabs Hannibal for one more kiss before leading them into the glassed-in shower.

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Hannibal has to grasp for the reins of his self-control in a way he has not needed since his first kill. Years of restraint and dedication to mastering every action and thought are now worn down to nothing but instinct; Will whines and keens with every touch, as though his skin feels the way Hannibal's does, as though every nerve is exposed, as though lightning is dancing between dermis and hypodermis.

Water cascades on them both, but neither are particularly interested in getting clean. Their kisses are frantic until they part for air, and then their hands start roaming all over each other. Hannibal keeps expecting Will to fade away like smoke and shadows, the way Mischa does in his darker recollections-

"Stay with me," Will says, biting at Hannibal's mouth. "Stay with me."

Despite the haze of lust and need, Hannibal keeps finding his thoughts veering towards the frightening *if: if Will had been shot; if Will had been the one on the other end of Gideon's knife; if Will tried to fight back and lost; if Will-*

"Stop thinking," Will orders in a raspy voice. "Come back to me."

"What have you done to me?" Hannibal doesn't mean to ask that. Thankfully, the shower drowns out his words and Will is too busy mapping over his mouth and jaw to listen.

The admission of vulnerability - *When was the last time you felt vulnerable?* - is to unlock doors to cells long shut, to revisit the horrors that taught Hannibal to grow his armor and his mask. Yet innocent Will Graham has found the weakness without even trying. Where others have tried with flattery or manipulation to meet impassable walls, Will waltzes into the fort without even seeing it. His unguarded trust tore down Hannibal's battlements; his honest devotion ripped apart iron gates. If Will asks now for Hannibal to confess to his darkest secrets, the doctor has no doubt that he will lay his soul bare, to be judged by the only being he considers more important than himself.

The realization of the fact rocks Hannibal and he falls back to lean on the wall. Will runs his hands over the older man's chest. Hannibal is still lost in his epiphany, but Will bends to try his teeth on Hannibal's nipples and the sensation ripples through him, pulling his focus back to his lover.

"Stay with me," Will says again, a quiet command.

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Any other time and Will would have been too skittish to do this, but right now he needs Hannibal, he's dying for it. He needs Hannibal to wipe away the memory of the room, erase the fear of the gun that was pointed at him, remove the taint of the copper-iron smell of blood from his lungs. He drops easily to his knees.

It's more intimidating than he thought, but Will draws on his dreams and memory of how his older lover does it. His left hand wraps around the thick cock and his right hand grips Hannibal's hip, before he laves his tongue over and around the fat glans and then closing his mouth over the head. Hannibal sighs, a deliciously encouraging sound, and when Will sucks tentatively, he hears a soft moan above him, audible despite the water.

Will reaches for Hannibal's left hand and places it on his own head, pushing at Hannibal to tangle his fingers in his wet hair. Hannibal acquiesces. It sends chills dancing over Will's spine, the good sort, and he starts bobbing his head, watchful of teeth, lips sliding along the shaft and trying to take as much as he can into his mouth. It is a strange sensation, to know he has Hannibal this intimately connected with him, that Hannibal is *inside* him; he wishes he's ready to be fucked. His right hand drops between his legs to grope himself; Hannibal's hand coil into his curls and keep him close, and Will's left hand rubs over the parts of the shaft that he can't accommodate in his mouth.

He tries to relax his throat as he has read online, tries to slide Hannibal deeper, but the gagging feeling is such a turn-off that he resumes his earlier attempts instead. Hannibal certainly enjoys it, his deep growling moans and exhalations stirring deep inside Will, leaving him with a sense of power he has seldom felt. He sucks as he pulls away, and swirls his tongue experimentally over the thick head, before relaxing to take Hannibal as deeply as he can again.

"Will, mylimas Will, prašom," Hannibal groans, volume just above the roar of blood in Will's body and the shower. "Please, I am close, pull away."

With Hannibal tugging on his hair, Will does as asked, but replaces his mouth with his hands, one caressing Hannibal's inner thighs and balls, the other stroking the way Will knows he likes it. Hannibal makes a needy sound that Will has never heard before when Will peers up. The older man does not close his eyes at all - his pupils are fully blown, ringed with what appears true scarlet from Will's perspective, and Will suddenly feels as though he has been tipped over into an abyss.

It's as though he is suddenly Hannibal and himself at the same time. He can see himself, kneeling before Hannibal as though in idol worship, lips parted, touching Hannibal and staring up at him in pure adulation; he can feel the astounding depth of Hannibal's feelings - the doctor did not lie, the word 'love' does not capture all he feels, but it is close - and his helplessness at controlling this tsunami of emotion, his soul too long battened down, his life too long solitary, now that his heart is finally unfrozen.

Hannibal brushes his thumb lightly over Will's eyelid and then comes with a guttural, drawn-out groan, painting Will's lips and face with ejaculate, which is soon washed away. Will comes soon after, still on his knees, and does not protest when Hannibal helps him to his feet.

They kiss again, languorously, their immediate need assuaged. Will concentrates on breathing as Hannibal washes his hair and then body, covering him with their preferred scents.

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"You've been so alone for so long," says Will afterwards, the two of them curled up in bed watching the fireplace. The adrenaline and fear from Will's encounter with Gideon has been washed away, though not fully buried, but Will does not want to think of Abel Gideon right now. "Didn't you ever want to find someone?"

"Not really," Hannibal says. "I was difficult as a young man. Eventually, I grew accustomed to my lifestyle. It's fairly regimented, and fitting someone else in was a challenge I did not find appealing."

His fingers trail over Will's arm draped possessively over him. He likes this shared lassitude - Will almost naked but for his boxers, pressed close to him, sharing a tray of cheeses and slices of apples that they are making do with as dinner.

Will hums and plucks a cube of what Hannibal calls La Tur cheese to feed Hannibal. "So what's different about me?"

Hannibal chews contemplatively and swallows before answering. "Everything."

"That's not an answer, Hannibal," Will says. He chooses an apple slice for himself.

"I'm not entirely certain myself, mon amour," says Hannibal with a contrite smile. "I suppose initially you reminded me of... of Mischa. That you needed shelter and care the way she did."

"I'm flattered," says Will. He brushes Hannibal's lips with his fingers.

"But you were also insistent on maintaining some level of independence. My other partners were more than happy to let me take care of them, and it is in my nature to do so. To have someone who clearly needs my care and yet wanting to be more than a dependent is unusual to me. To have someone who tries to take care of me, to make my life easier... It is unique. You are unique."

"So are you."

"Not in the same way."

"No, not at all. I'm not sure a regular person would be able to take the intensity of your emotions," says Will slowly. He presses his mouth to Hannibal's collarbone, sets his teeth there for a heartbeat. "I was told you don't really show your feelings. You show them around me, though."

Hannibal laughs quietly. "I don't mean to. You read them better than other people, that's all." He sighs and continues, "My defenses are as nothing against you."

"Do you always defend yourself?"

"It's a habit. When I was young I did not wish for others to know me easily, given the darkness of my past." Hannibal runs his fingers through Will's curls and the young man leans into the touch. "I do not wish for you to see that either, but I can't hide it from you. I will admit that there is darkness still within me."

Will peers up. Hannibal is inscrutable. "A dangerous darkness?"

"Never dangerous to you." Hannibal smiles at Will. "But I don't wish you to wander in dark places."

"Afraid of what I'll find?" Will sighs. "I have enough shadows of my own."

"You do. Perhaps as time passes the shadows will fade."

"Perhaps."

They pick at the cheeses from the tray, feeding each other leisurely.

Hannibal kisses Will languidly. "What would you like for Christmas?"

"A part-time job, maybe," Will says. "Can't be sponging off you forever."

Hannibal frowns. "I can support both of us with my income."

"It's not that you can't. It's that I need to earn my own spending money, Hannibal. I feel... I feel insecure without that. Sorry, but that's how it is, growing up poor." Will nuzzles under Hannibal's chin.

The doctor takes a slice of gouda cheese and feeds Will, enjoying the way the younger man flicks his tongue over Hannibal's fingers. "I'd have thought you'll want to work on getting

into college."

Will clears his throat. "Well, I've been thinking over that too. I don't think college is for me, Hannibal, and, uh, it's not 'cause of the tuition."

"Oh?"

"Don't get me wrong, I really enjoy studying everything we've been doing so far, and I don't want that to stop. Except for calculus, I don't enjoy calculus at all, even if I like most math." The young man traces abstract patterns through Hannibal's chest hair. "But I can't... I can't function well in a place full of people. It's a nightmare waiting to happen. The past couple months kinda proved that I do okay away from large groups, right?"

"I can't disagree, though you have had to deal with first your father's passing and then with our very young relationship. I daresay your emotional focus wasn't on socializing."

"But I made friends despite all that," Will retorts mildly. "I actually made friends, one of them on my own. I'd never have done that at school. I'd be too busy trying to be invisible."

Hannibal exhales softly. "What do you intend, mon amour?"

"I was gonna apprentice at Chordophone, learn to repair string instruments and all that," says Will, and his expression darkens momentarily. "Guess that's out of the question now."

Hannibal feeds him a slice of gouda again, this time paired with apple. "You don't wish to consider music at college?"

"No. I'm good," says Will without false modesty, "but I'm not great. Music is a release, and I don't want it to be a chore. If I choose music school, that's what it'll become."

"You *have* thought about this."

"I have plenty of time to think, Hannibal."

"So what are your personal preferences?"

Will chews on his lower lip and says, "I know it's not glamorous like being a doctor or, I don't know, an FBI agent. But I'd really like to restore pianos." He takes a deep breath and snuggles closer, listens to Hannibal's steady heartbeat. "I liked watching Dad fix things. And to be able to put damaged things, neglected things back together... I like the idea of that."

Hannibal kisses the top of Will's head. "I'll support you in whatever you choose, mon amour, and it does sound suited to your nature. We'll look around, see if there's any piano restoration services that would take on an apprentice next January. Let me have you to myself for the rest of the year."

"I like that."

"Your Christmas gift?"

Will smiles crookedly. "Surprise me. Nothing too extravagant, though. I'm already busting my balls thinking of what to get you."

He does not mention Mrs Komeda's suggestion. For one thing, Will suspects his virginity probably is not going to make it till Christmas.

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Jack calls at two in the morning, something about Dr Carruthers having been murdered. Hannibal tells Jack to remember that he's terminated the consultation services and hangs up.

Rolling over to Hannibal's side of the bed, Will mumbles a complaint. "Who was that?"

"No one important," says Hannibal, already sliding closer to hold Will, who is sleep-warmed and pliant. The young man is more than happy to sidle closer and Hannibal is about to initiate more, when they both hear a quiet noise from downstairs.

Will tenses. "Hannibal?"

"Take the phone and text Jack or Beverly Katz. Lock yourself in the bathroom," says Hannibal, already getting out of bed. His preferred weapons are downstairs in the kitchen, but he is not without options. The *wakizashi* that Hannibal displays in his closet comes in useful now.

"Hannibal-"

"Will. Do it." The Ripper flashes out for a second from Hannibal's usual mask, and the presence of the predator silences Will. The young man gulps and obeys, shutting the door noiselessly. The click of the lock assures Hannibal that Will should be all right.

The tread of the intruder's feet is so deliberate and nearly silent that Hannibal wonders if he would have heard it were he still asleep. He is an extremely light sleeper, and thus far has only just managed to categorize Will's nighttime noises as safe sounds to ignore.

Gideon has a gun. Hannibal recalls the direction of the slash wounds in Gideon's wife. *Right handed.*

"You don't have to pretend, Dr Lecter. I know you're waiting for me," says Abel Gideon from outside the bedroom. "Aren't you glad that your precious Will Graham is unharmed?"

"Surely you don't expect me to thank you, Dr Gideon," Hannibal responds. "The trauma you inflicted on him... Tsk. I'm not too pleased about that."

"Would you have been more pleased to have his heart cut out and placed in his hands as an offering?"

"I already have his heart, Dr Gideon, along with the rest of him. But I won't forget you said that." Hannibal does not want to step outside; he is at a disadvantage.

Gideon knows better than to step into the bedroom, however. "I suppose your clever young man has already informed the police I am here? But if they come in, they'll have to come up the staircase, and I have enough ammunition to kill them and then come in and kill both of you, Dr Lecter."

"So why haven't you?" Hannibal shifts his grip on the *wakizashi*.

"Because," says Gideon, "you never tried to mess with my brain. I appreciate that. I think you know how terrible it is, to have the sanctity of a mind invaded."

"Of course. It's terribly rude when people don't leave what they find intact."

"Unfortunately, I also think you know where the lovely Dr Bloom is. So here's the deal. Tell me where she is, and I'll leave immediately. Otherwise, I'll come in, and I don't like your chances of whatever weapon you have against a gun." Gideon chuckles. "And I will shoot, a lot. I might only incapacitate you, but that'll give me a chance with Will Graham again. I don't want to hurt your pretty boytoy, Dr Lecter, he's truly a gem, *but I will*."

Hannibal weighs the options, the blade heavy in his hand.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I'm *waiting*," Gideon says in a sing-song tone.

Hannibal raises the *wakizashi.* "What do you intend to do with her?"

"Kill her."

"She's my friend, Dr Gideon. I would be terribly remiss if I chose to sacrifice her. Besides, Alana Bloom is already under FBI protection." Hannibal slides forward. Will should have sent the message, hopefully to Katz, and the police should be on their way.

Gideon snorts. "You're trying to delay me."

"I am. If you stay, you'll be arrested. My, well, boyfriend has already contacted the authorities." Hannibal smiles. "Your choice now."

As Hannibal expected, the intruder starts walking away. Hannibal matches his footfalls and exits, a shadow moving in shadow, and keeps his presence muted.

Abruptly, Gideon swivels on his heel and fires. Hannibal manages to dodge, and then he crouches low and rushes Gideon. His shoulder hits Gideon's midsection and drives him to the floor, winding him.

Hannibal expertly disarms Gideon, breaks a few ribs, and then dislocates his jaw before Gideon can speak. The man gurgles with pain.

"You threatened my Will. You break into my home," Hannibal whispers. "And you called him my boytoy. That was *abominably* rude."

He drags Gideon to the stairs and pulls him up to look Hannibal in the eyes. The other man tries to struggle and Hannibal knocks him against the wall again where the broken ribs are, just as a reminder.

"I might have let you go to Alana Bloom if you hadn't involved Will Graham." The psychiatrist holds Gideon up carefully, his superior strength cording along his arms, until only Gideon's toes are touching the edges of the top stair. He drinks in the pure fear in the intruder's eyes.

Such a shame: this is a moment of clarity for Abel Gideon, and he's not savoring it as he ought to. There is no doubt that Gideon will revisit this moment once he can think without severe pain.

Hannibal smiles with the mercy of a tiger. "As it is, I'm just going to let you go."

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Will clutches the phone until he hears Hannibal outside the door, and then he flings it open. "Hannibal! I heard a gunshot, are you all right? Are you hurt? Did he get you?"

"I'm fine, Will, I'm all right, he missed." Hannibal lets Will pat him all over to ascertain for himself. "It's all right now. You called the police?"

"I called them after I texted Beverly. Are they here? Where's Abel Gideon?"

"He's at the bottom of the stairs. I tackled him-"

Will pulls away and punches Hannibal in the shoulder. "You *tackled* him? You tackled a murderer *who is armed with a gun*? And you-" He catches the pleased gleam in Hannibal's burgundy eyes and punches him again, making the doctor flinch. "You're actually proud of that! Hannibal, I swear I'm going to kill you myself!"

"Sorry," the older man says, pulling Will close for a kiss before leading him out to the hallway, where Beverly Katz is standing.

"You're not sorry at all," Will grouses. "Damn it, Hannibal, you know I can't take this."

Hannibal hugs him once more. "I had to, to make sure we were safe. And we are."

"Dr Lecter, you've been very lucky," says Beverly. She looks down the stairs where Gideon is being moved onto a stretcher. "And very careless. Did you forget to re-arm your security system?"

Will pales. "Oh God. Was it because we got carried away and-"

"You mean to tell me that you two were so busy ha- Okay, never mind, don't tell me." Beverly sighs and quickly pulls her shiny hair into a ponytail. "At least he's out of commission for the next few weeks while his bones heal."

Hannibal squeezes Will's hand. "I'm sorry, honestly. I should have remembered. I've put you in danger again."

He does look repentant and Will bumps him with his elbow. "We were both at fault. And, well. We're safe. It's good." He then frowns. "Beverly, is Dr Bloom okay?"

"Yeah, she is. I have her at my house at the moment, with a Glock on the bedside table for her use." The agent smirks. "And I know the girl can shoot almost as well as I do. But we'll rest easy tonight, knowing Gideon is off the streets."

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Matthew grins and bounces on his heels like a kid. "Really? Y-ou guys want to invite me for dinner?"

"Yeah, I've been meaning to ask you. Hannibal's been after me the past three weeks 'cause he wants to meet you."

"He's not angry about th-the books, right?" Matthew looks uncomfortable. "I c-could um. I could... pay it back. Slowly."

Will shakes his head and laughs. "Nah. It's not that. He knows I have, um, difficulty making friends. I didn't have any when I was in school. He wants to meet you."

"Um. W-why did you leave school, if you d-don't mind me asking?"

Will smiles crookedly and stares at Matthew's hands. "I don't mix well with people. So put me in a place with a thousand kids and a few who just can't keep their mouths shut about things they don't know..." He chuckles self-deprecatingly. "I get, um. defensive. And into fights that I couldn't win, 'cause I'm not, you know, good at fighting."

"I've looked you up online. I saw the articles. Abel Gideon and, um. Your dad. And the ph-photos."

"Oh."

"He's very handsome," says Matthew with a cheeky smirk. "You're a lucky guy."

Will can't help the huge grin on his face. "Yeah. I am."

The back door slams open and the manager, Ella, pokes her head out. "Matthew! Your break's already over, get your scrawny ass in here."

"S-s-s-sorry Ella. I'll, uh, I-I-I w-was just-"

"Sh-sh-sh-sh-shut up and get to work." The woman ignores Will entirely, as she always does.

Her mockery of Matthew's stutter irritates Will every single time he witnesses it. He has no doubt that his friend is bullied worse at home.

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"And the worst thing is, he's stuck. He needs to work to earn money for his nursing degree, but if he moves away, Esther will be that vile woman's target."

"You mentioned before that Esther is his sister, yes?"

"Yeah, she's mildly autistic, according to Matthew. I don't understand how his mother is okay with all this." Will chops the garlic with more fervor than necessary and then puts the knife down, fuming. Hannibal rescues the chopped garlic cloves for his lamb navarin. "He's... he's sweet. I mean, sure he has a slight speech impediment, but he's not cruel or, or mean. He's really sweet, and quite smart too."

Hannibal takes over the knife work and dices the carrots, turnip and onions. "Should I be jealous?"

"You know you don't have to be." Will catches the small curve of Hannibal's smile and rolls his eyes. "It just makes me angry that people don't take care of their own."

"That seems to be one of your drives, Will," says Hannibal, starting up the stove and readying the pot for the lamb. "Protecting others."

Will makes a face. "I suppose. I've always realized... Um. You know how when you read a good book, you can get lost in it?"

"Yes. The words disappear and it is pure communication between author and reader. It is sublime to encounter great literature that allows for that," Hannibal says. His attention is mostly on Will, even as he browns the lamb pieces.

Will knows Hannibal is shifting into Dr Lecter mode. He doesn't mind, which is odd, because if this had taken place in August he'd have thrown a fit. Now, in the beginning of December, he is comfortable with allowing Hannibal access into his brain. "So when I see people being bullied, it's like, I can... I can feel what it's like."

"You have been the target of bullies, Will, it's not surprising to be able to empathize with other victims of bullying."

"I don't empathize only with the victims, Hannibal," says Will. His voice drops. "I can feel how powerful it is to make others miserable."

Hannibal pauses in the middle of turning over the meat. "You mean-"

"I empathize with the bullies too." Will pulls at the sleeves of the maroon jumper that he's appropriated from Hannibal. "They feel good when they're exerting their dominance. And so I feel good too. And I hate that."

"You fear you'll like it so much that you'll become like them?"

"I guess." Will chews on his lower lip. "Could it happen?"

Hannibal hums as he considers. "Some victims of bullying become bullies to regain their sense of self and their power. You're not the type, however."

"I'm not?"

"Given how you endured your years with your father's 'bad days', I highly doubt you are one with a vengeful streak, mon amour."

Will can practically hear the quotation marks in his statement. He knows Hannibal disapproves of his dad, and Will doesn't blame him. If he were an outsider, he'd blame Dave Graham too. But Will knows his dad was tired of life and miserable, and Will's existence reminded him on a daily basis the happiness he lost.

"So what do I have, Hannibal?"

"A protective streak, bordering on sacrificial. You put others above yourself, consistently. Your father, me, your friend. The other members of your social circle. It is your nature, I think, to shield others." Hannibal removes the lamb pieces and adds diced onion and carrot. Stirring slowly, he continues, "You are the mongoose that strikes at the snakes who come too close to your pack. And those whom you choose to belong to your pack are fortunate indeed."

"I'm a mongoose?"

"Furry, adorable in the right light, and vicious when cornered or in a fight. Yes, mon rêve, you are a mongoose." The smirk that accompanies that metaphor is far too smug. "Hmm. New pet name? Mon rêve, mon amour, mongoose."

"Hannibal, don't make me come over there."

"No, I'd rather make you come over the steel prep table," Hannibal ripostes. "Much easier to clean."

Will blushes and has to hide his face. "No one will ever believe you said that. Oh God, I have a gorgeous and *filthy* boyfriend."

"Yes, you do, mongoose. Now go and set the table for your friend."

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Hannibal finds himself warming to Matthew Brown. There is a keen and assessing sharpness to the boy, and an innate cunning that hide his edges. While Will has yet to notice anything off about Matthew, Hannibal recognizes the tells - it's like looking into the past. If the Ripper could pick an apprentice, Matthew would be it.

"Will mentions often that you have a younger sister," says Hannibal. "How old is she?"

"Eight. She's brilliant at astronomy, and can name all the c-onstellations of the Northern Hemisphere." Matthew brightens up with the topic. "She likes to d-draw them on my arm. Dot them in marker a-and trace them."

"Maybe one day you can get a tattoo of a constellation, and she can map the stars on your body." Will is smiling with genuine warmth. He serves Matthew more of the lamb, behaving exactly as a host might; Hannibal is more and more pleased at Will's blossoming. The shyness and uncertainty of the Will he knew have been transmuted into modest hospitality. Seeing Will's self-confidence, Hannibal ponders what Will might become, if nudged in the right direction.

"Th-at's the plan." The gangly young man eats with nervous energy, small mouthfuls and quick actions. "This is delicious, Dr Lecter."

Will asks about Esther and her study of the stars. Both he and Hannibal are content to listen to Matthew wax lyrical about his sister. When they finish their lamb navarin, Hannibal leaves the two young men to chat while he clears away the plates and serves dessert.

Hannibal reflects on the peculiar attraction Will holds for psychopaths: Budge did not kill him, Gideon likes him, Matthew is genuinely fond of him, and Hannibal, of course, adores him to the depths of his dark soul.

"Autumn apple cheesecake," he announces as he comes back into the room. The two young men jerk up, having been whispering to each other across the table. Will looks guilty, his face flushed.

Hannibal frowns. "I seem to have missed something."

"Nothing," Will answers too quickly, but Hannibal doesn't miss the tiny smile shared between the two friends.

*****

"Thanks, Dr Lecter, Will. For dinner a-and driving me home."

"You're welcome," says Hannibal. "I hope you enjoyed yourself."

"I-I did."

Will waves to Matthew as the young man alights. "Thanks, Matthew, for... you know."

"You're welcome, Will. I hope it works."

Before Hannibal can pull away, the door to Matthew's house opens and a chubby girl with light brown hair dashes out, yelling, "Mattie Mattie Mattie I saw Pisces and I can name all the objects in it and I know the declination and right ascension-"

"Hey sweetheart," says Matthew, sweeping up his sister and kissing her on the cheek. "Easy now. Remember what we do when we come home?"

Esther takes a breath, finally pausing in her litany. "Hello Mattie," she says slowly, as though repeating a lesson. "Welcome home."

"Hello sweetheart." Matthew kisses her cheek again. "It's good to see you."

Hannibal cuts the engine entirely. Will glances over and sees the struck expression on his lover's face. There is a terrible longing and love that is almost blinding in its intensity and pain. He knows who Hannibal is thinking of.

"Let's say hi, shall we?" Will asks, touching his lover's knee.

The doctor swallows dryly and nods.

*****

Esther avoids eye contact at first, ducking her face away from Hannibal and Will, but when Hannibal starts telling her the myth of Ganymede and Zeus she warms to him, and she informs him gravely of globular clusters and open clusters and the Andromeda galaxy.

Will sneakily takes a picture of Hannibal sitting in the gravel of the driveway, heedless of the damage to his pants, while Esther gesticulates to outline the shape of the Andromeda galaxy. The doctor gives her his complete attention. It's almost like witnessing a sacred moment. Will waits on the side, his heart feeling too full.

The door slams open again and two women stride out, one of whom is Ella, and the other a tall, mousy-haired woman that bears a striking resemblance to Matthew. She has to be Matthew's mother.

Ella is the first to speak. Her round face is twisted in a fierce scowl. "Esther, you know you're not allowed to leave the house. And Matthew, can't you even grab her and bring her in? What good are you as her brother?"

"S-sorry. I'll, um, I'll get her n-n-n-now." He goes over and picks Esther up. "Come on, sweetheart. It's p-past your b-b-bedtime."

"Uh, Ella, dear, we should go in." Matthew's mother bobs her head apologetically at Will and Hannibal. "Thank you for sending Matthew home. Um, I didn't get your name, sir."

Hannibal stands and brushes down his pants before offering his hand. "Dr Hannibal Lecter."

"And this is your son?" she asks, shaking Hannibal's hand limply.

Will tenses very slightly but makes himself offer his hand too. "His boyfriend, actually. Will Graham."

"Boyfriend?" Ella exclaims, and then scowls at Matthew. "You let a pedophile play with your sister? You stupid oaf-"

"Madam," says Hannibal in a calm voice; Will senses the anger at the insult, "you should watch your words."

"And you should watch where you put your cradle-snatching hands, *doctor*." Ella then rounds on Matthew. "And you are to stop associating with him," she tells the tall young man, pointing at Will. Will wants to lash out at the rude woman, seeing fury settle in the lines along Hannibal's shoulders, but Esther starts crying and shrieking when Ella grabs the girl away from her brother.

Matthew watches miserably as his mother and her girlfriend trot back to the house. "I'm s-s-sorry, Dr L-ecter. I-I-I-I didn't expect th-at t-to happen."

"Not everyone is as accepting of the unconventional, Matthew," says Hannibal gently. They can hear Esther screaming inside the house. "You'd best go on in, your sister needs you."

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"You really think so?" Will asks.

"Well, you should know better than I do what he'd like. You could ask my aunt if you want another opinion," says Mikolaj.

Will grimaces. "I already did."

"What did she say?"

"Guess."

There is a short pause. Then Mikolaj bursts into laughter. *"She suggested sex, didn't she? That's a perfect idea!"*

"You and your aunt are incorrigible."

"Yeah, well. My dad's being anal about all the people I'm supposed to meet and greet," Mikolaj complains. *"Let me have my fun. Least you don't have to do a ton of parties."*

"Just one," Will says. He rolls onto his back and sighs. "More than enough. Will you be back for the concert?"

"Sorry, Will, I'm gonna be stuck here till New Year's."

"Well... Oh, he's done, gotta hang up bye."

Hannibal emerges in a cloud of steam, wrapped in a cream bathrobe. He looks suspicious. "Who were you talking to?"

"Mikolaj. He's back in Krakow for Christmas." He hugs himself and then adds, "It's not... He'll forget about me when he starts university, won't he?"

"He might, or he might not. But *you* won't, and that, mon rêve, is what's beautiful about your affections. You don't bestow them easily, but where you do, you cherish the relationships." After pecking a kiss on Will's cheek, Hannibal sits down in front of the fire and dries his hair. It's not that cold in December but Will now knows that his lover resents it, opting to wrap up in a coat that's thicker than necessary and lighting the fireplace every night.

He sits up to admire the view of his lover's forearms. Then he takes over from his lover, marveling that he has the liberty to love and understand this man, from his habits to his history.

Hannibal hums with pleasure and says, "There are some lovely places in Krakow. The Wawel Royal castle is particularly stunning."

Will tosses the damp towel into the laundry basket. "Um. Can we go downtown tomorrow? I, uh, I'd like to get some gifts."

"Any reason you wish for my company?" Hannibal asks, turning out the lights.

Will snuggles into Hannibal's arms. "It's gonna sound stupid."

"Mm. You never sound stupid to me, mon amour."

"I've never done Christmas shopping." Will sighs and slides his arm around his older lover. "Dad and I used to drive down and walk around, looking at the lights and decor and... Sometimes, we'd get a small tabletop tree, put some cheap tinsel on. And then we'd play Ella Fitzgerald's Christmas on repeat."

Hannibal trails his fingers through Will's dark curls. "Which was your favorite song?"

"*Chestnuts roasting on an open fire, Jack Frost nipping at your nose..."* Will's voice is somewhat muffled against Hannibal's skin. "But this year I actually have people I wanna get presents for, so, um. If you could keep me company?"

"My last appointment tomorrow is at four, so I'll pick you up from home at five-thirty? We'll dine out tomorrow then." Hannibal kisses Will and their tongues slide together, slow and loving. "Who are you getting presents for?"

"Mikolaj and Mrs Komeda, though I don't know what I should get her since she pretty much has everything. Matthew and Esther. Dr Bloom, since she did try to help us. And you."

"You want me there while you buy my Christmas gift?"

"I... I don't want you to know what it *is*, but, um. I-I've seen the kind of crowds in the stores and it freaks me out. So yeah, I really would want you there with me."

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Will is partway through his lunch when he hears the doorbell. When he opens the door, he sees a beautiful blonde woman standing on the stoop, examining the stone lions.

"Good afternoon," she says with a tiny smile that barely warms her eyes. "I'm Bedelia Du Maurier, Hannibal's therapist."

"Uh, hi. I'm Will. Will Graham." He shook her gloved hand. *Dr Du Maurier*, he thinks. She is possibly one of the most composed persons he has ever met.

"I know, I've seen your photos. Hannibal talks so much about you, I feel I have come to know you as well," she says.

Will smiles hesitantly. "I hope it's been good."

She is daunting in her absolute calm. Will can't determine how he feels about her, and keeps his eyes averted. "I came today to inform you that I shan't be able to attend the Christmas dinner party he invited me to."

Will is taken aback. "Oh! Um, you didn't have to come all the way here to tell him. Me. I mean, a phone call would've been enough."

Dr Du Maurier smiles a little wider. "No, it wouldn't have been. I am going away for some time. However, I do have a gift for both of you." She hands him a black paper bag, its contents wrapped in tasteful blue and silver paper. "Merry Christmas, Will Graham. Do convey my regards to Hannibal. I hope you find happiness in each other."

That is an odd thing to say, Will muses. *I wonder what Hannibal has told her about me.*

*****

"She said she would be away?" Hannibal asks as they circle the parking lot for a spot. "Did she say for how long?"

"She just said 'for some time'," says Will, preoccupied with checking the short list he has made for his shopping. "Um, is getting a music box for Mrs Komeda too tacky?"

"She will like it, Will," says Hannibal.

He wonders if Bedelia is trying to escape. Not telling him personally is rather rude. Throughout the excursion, he ponders the myriad possible actions she may have taken, and comes to the conclusion that perhaps she has peeked through the stitching of his person suit, and has realized what she is risking.

No matter. Thus far she has nothing on him, and he holds her secret. He hopes she got him a good wine for a gift - she has an impeccable palate for wine.

"We need a tree," Will says suddenly. Then he becomes flustered. "Uh, unless you don't usually get a tree."

"Would you like one?" asks Hannibal. He does put up a few in concession to the holiday, but he doesn't really celebrate it; the crass sappy commercialism of the season is depressing, and his patients come to him weighed down with seasonal affective disorder.

Will bits his lip and stares at his lap. "Yeah. I mean, I know it's kind of tacky and chintzy but... Never mind. It was a stupid thought."

Hannibal slides his car into a spot. "Do you want us to have one?"

"Y-yeah."

"Then we will get one later."

*****

Thankfully the company does next-day deliveries; Hannibal has no intention of having pine needles all over his car or coat. The gifts are bought quickly, the overpriced decorations take slightly longer, but at the end of the tedious shopping expedition, Will looks cheerful and happy, so Hannibal counts it as a positive end to the day.

Will thanks him with a blowjob against the inside of the front door when they get home. Hannibal tells Will afterwards that he still won't go shopping with him next Christmas.

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The tree arrives the next day and is set up in the sitting room, near the harpsichord. Will doesn't waste any time laying out the ornaments. Hannibal helps, draping garish garlands of red and gold around the tree, and Will takes charge of fairy lights and hanging the baubles. They bicker like an old couple over the aesthetics of a star over an angel. They end up using the former after Hannibal resorts to pinning Will against the harpsichord and groping him expertly, keeping him on the edge of climax until Will gives in.

It is fantastically domestic, even the mess after the decorating is done. They place Bedelia's presents under the tree. They look forlorn, but Hannibal has his own shopping that is being delivered within the week, so the base of the tree won't look quite as empty by the time they have their dinner party.

Will looks especially pleased and rapt. "It feels like home," he tells Hannibal.

"It is our home, mongoose." Hannibal nibbles on the shell of Will's ear and smiles into dark chocolate curls. "It's our home."

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His menu is already designed. Fig and ham salad, feuillantine de pintade au foie d'agneau, selle d'agneau aux épices, coeur de boeuf a la Tripieres, and the classic honey-glazed ham, along with some sausages, and poached pears for dessert. The array of hors d'oeuvres is another feast altogether, but it is delightful labor. He is only inviting eleven guests, a very small gathering, but he would rather be exclusive than to overwhelm Will with too many new faces.

Alana Bloom is definitely going to be there, as well as Beverly Katz. The two ladies seem to be moving towards an understanding, and Will is comfortable enough with them. Bedelia he invited but she has turned it down, so Jack Crawford takes her place. Hannibal looks forward to stoking the man's frustration. Bella has declined; she is not well enough. Mrs Komeda is definitely one of the guests, along with her partner Johann. The final six are Mr and Mrs Frucht; his mentor Dr Saari, his wife, who was an accomplished flutist, and their daughter Elizabeth; Emanuella James, the curator.

With the menu ready and the guests confirmed, Hannibal looks towards selecting his meat. The basement is no longer suitable as a workshop, but it is still where he stocks the meat after he slaughters the pigs. It will be dismantled after Christmas - Hannibal knows being the Ripper isn't sustainable, not with Will in his life.

At least for his final feast, Hannibal does not encounter problems leaving the bedroom. Will sleeps very soundly after two orgasms in quick succession, Hannibal has discovered, and his young lover does not protest the exertion; if anything, he is very keen on assisting. He also gets thirsty after, so Hannibal ensures that he brings Will a glass of water every night. Hannibal feels like he should feel guilty about drugging his lover, but Will thrives on the restful sleep, so the doctor decides that he has nothing to feel guilty for.

*****

December 8th: Hannibal picks up Ella when she is driving home from work. That first night, he takes her liver, heart, and legs. The next night he drives them back to where he took her, puts her back in her car, her hands wired onto the wheel, and her eyes on the dash, facing the heavens. He thinks that may be the first time those eyes ever looked up where the stars are.

They visit Matthew and Esther after the news came out. Esther clings to Hannibal for the entire duration of their visit. Matthew stutters only once in the hour Will and Hannibal are there. When they prepare to leave, Matthew shakes Hannibal's hand and says, very firmly, "Thank you."

Hannibal smiles. "You're very welcome, Matthew. Take care of your sister, and don't hesitate to ask me for assistance in the future."

*****

December 12th: Hannibal visits Mr Trinh, a sommelier who kept pushing the wrong wine for a dinner Hannibal went to with Alana. He takes his innards and tongue. Mr Trinh is posed with his palms together, kneeling at a crossroads, his insides replaced with plastic poinsettia, his mouth full of fake mistletoe, and his head crowned with artificial holly. Hannibal wishes he could have seen Jack's face for that one.

After dealing with Mr Trinh, Hannibal cleans out the Rolodex, throwing the name cards into a dumpster near his office. He is pleasantly surprised that he has no difficulty doing that. Maybe he is ready to retire the Ripper.

*****

The last one will have to wait. She is out in Maine, apparently; the website says she'll be back on the 17th.

Hannibal uses the time to cure the meats and watch the FBI dance.

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The sixteenth of December arrives very quickly. Will laments that it arrived too soon.

The benefit concert is at one of the recital halls in Johns Hopkins Peabody Institute. Hannibal sees many familiar faces, some former colleagues and some acquaintances from various social events. This being one week from Christmas, many of them are already dressed with the festive season in mind. He is deep in conversation with Dr Sutcliffe and Dr Hazlinda when Mrs Komeda comes up to them and gently draws Hannibal aside.

"I think your Will is suffering stage fright. Why don't you go calm him down?" she murmurs, and takes his place in the small group to chat with the two neurologists.

Hannibal navigates through the assembled crowd and goes backstage, where the young musicians are already getting ready. Will is going second, after a thirteen-year-old cellist, and he is looking quite green around the gills. The doctor chuckles and pulls him aside. The other

musicians are a lot more collected than Will; then again, they aren't strangers to recitals or performances.

"Hannibal?" Will squeaks. "Why did I want to do this? Why didn't you stop me from doing this? Everyone here has more talent in their little fingers than I do in my entire being."

"Calm down, mon amour, you'll do fine. You'll be perfect," Hannibal says with a gentle smile. "You play from the heart, Will. Those who understand music will appreciate that far more than technical dexterity. And you have been practicing."

Will inhales and lets his breath out in a rush. "Yeah, okay. But it's a Steinway. I'm so used to the Blüthner now. It'll sound weird to me."

"Not to me." Hannibal trails a finger down Will's cheek and then smooths back his hair. "Let me hear your heart."

Somewhat less frantic now, Will smiles and then plants a brief kiss on Hannibal's lips.

"I love you, mongoose."

"I love you too. I hate that nickname, but I love you."

*****

As Will has suspected, he is so nervous he does not dare to raise his gaze. He hears the polite applause when he's introduced, and he bows and takes his spot on autopilot. There is someone coughing in the back, and then a shuffle of programs, and then silence.

He can feel the anticipation, hungry and judgmental. His pulse picks up and his throat tightens. He knows he can do this, but he also knows he very likely will screw this up, and embarrass Hannibal-

- who is sitting in the front row just besides Mrs Komeda, and looking exceptionally handsome in a dark blue suit and a paisley tie -

- who believes in him fully and loves him despite his flaws -

- who willingly endured two hours of noisy, rude crowds just to make sure Will doesn't feel overwhelmed when shopping for Christmas gifts -

Will takes a deep breath and smiles.

Let me hear your heart.

He relaxes his fingers, and launches into *'O Holy Night'*.

*****

When Will comes onstage in his suit - Mrs Komeda wanted a fairly casual event since many of the attendees are coming immediately after work - there was a susurration among the

audience. Evidently, quite a few remember who Will is dating.

Now Will has his eyes closed, his hands transmuting ivory and string into music and beauty. Hannibal listens intently, fully focused on his lover. Will's choices tend toward the classical, which, given the young man's history, does not surprise Hannibal in the least. He hasn't asked Will to perform for him before this and now Hannibal lets himself drown in the flow.

Will moves from the stirring *O Holy Night,* to Saint-Saëns' Allegro Appassionato in C-sharp minor Op.70, a wonderful demonstration of his self-taught brilliance, and then shifts to a light jazzy piece that Hannibal thinks is titled *Sweet Lorraine*. The last is supposed to be another jazz piece.

However, when Will starts the first two bars of his final piece, there is a soft ripple of surprised laughter. The sound startles the young man out of his reverie and he freezes, eyes growing wide and suddenly looking very young and afraid.

Hannibal clears his throat deliberately, and Will immediately sees him in the front row. The doctor smiles and inclines his head.

I am here, mon amour. Let me hear your heart.

Will breathes deeply and begins anew. *Für Elise* sings out with tender yearning, gently rising and then races with a flourish, full of delight and thrill, before returning to the first, familiar theme. Hannibal holds his breath, caught up in Will's heartfelt playing.

He draws out the last cadence, allowing the mood to slowly dissipate. When the last note finally fades, Hannibal feels his heart swell with emotion. He thinks he hasn't truly drawn breath since Will began his fourth piece, and from the looks of a few other musically-inclined guests, Hannibal knows Will has impressed.

He hears little of the rest of the evening; his mind is full of Beethoven, and of Will's startling blue eyes seeking him out at the end of his segment.

"I won't blame you if you left now, Hannibal," Mrs Komeda whispers to the doctor as they applaud the fourth musician, an eighteen-year-old cellist. It is the intermission so the guests stand and exit the recital hall with some noise. "It was a marvelous performance."

"Thank you," says Hannibal. He escorts her out of her seat, and then finds his way backstage again. "I look forward to seeing you next week at dinner."

*****

Will brightens the moment he sees Hannibal, and does not put up a protest about leaving so soon.

"Did you hear?" Will asks after they have buckled in.

Hannibal leans over and kisses Will deeply. "I heard everything."

Chapter End Notes

Okay, very bits and pieces. Sorry for that. Um, next chapter should make it up to you guys for this fragmented but necessary chapter.
Also, I am not a funny person, so apologies for the lame attempts at humor.
The Christmas Song
The performance pieces:
O Holy Night
Saint-Saëns Allegro appassionato in C-sharp minor Op.70
Sweet Lorraine
Für Elise

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There is only light from the fireplace and the bathroom. They undress in silence, Hannibal taking the time to hang up their suits to send for cleaning tomorrow. Will waits until Hannibal is done before going over to kiss him, long and deep, just wallowing in the sensation of their lips and tongues moving against each other with practiced ease. Hannibal feels solid and real, the only real person the entire night; Will runs his hands over his lover and wonders what he has done to deserve Hannibal.

"You were glorious tonight," Hannibal murmurs against Will's mouth. "You were brilliant."

"I played for you," says Will. He does not ask, *Did you understand? Everything that I can't say, that I can't find words to.*

"I know. I know, mon amour," Hannibal says, holding Will close, like Will is fragile and precious to him. *I heard everything. I heard* ***you.***

They remain swaying and kissing on the spot, just outside the spill of light from their bathroom. Will can't remember the moment he stopped thinking of Hannibal's bathroom, Hannibal's bedroom, Hannibal's bed, Hannibal's home, and started identifying the places as theirs. The guest room he stayed in initially is now only a holding place for his clothes and some books, along with the laptop that Hannibal never seems to use.

When they finally part, Will is panting slightly and Hannibal's hair is sticking out where Will ran his fingers through. They grin at each other, Will feeling open and exposed in a manner he has never been. They are hard against each other, and Will finds his heart leaping into his throat when he once again takes in just how *much* Hannibal wants him.

"Hannibal?" Will says quietly; he pushes down his embarrassment. "Do you want- I, uh, I want us to... um. I want to have sex with you."

The older man chuckles. "Mon amour, we have been having sex," he points out.

"You know what I mean," says Will, ducking his head and staring at the play of shadow and light on Hannibal's shoulder, where Will has placed his hand.

"I'm quite afraid I don't."

Will huffs with exasperated affection. "You just want to make me say it."

The glimmer of amusement in Hannibal's maroon eyes gives away his tease, but he just noses Will at the temple and asks, "Say what?"

"Fine." Will licks his lips and mutters, "I want you to... Dammit, Hannibal, I know you know."

"No I don't."

"I want you to... tofuckme." Will squeezes his eyes shut, knowing he is turning pink from embarrassment. He knows the blush is probably spreading over his chest now and he buries his face against Hannibal's neck, and pretends Hannibal isn't shaking with silent laughter. He does pinch the doctor's hip, though. "Fucker."

Hannibal chuckles again. "That's appropriate."

Will turns an even brighter pink when he realizes what Hannibal is implying, and swats him on the arm.

The older man is smiling broadly as he leads Will into the bathroom. "Come, let us bathe."

"You're not going to-"

"We do need to get clean first, Will." Hannibal leans in and sniffs. "And I'd much rather smell you instead of everyone else."

*****

They rinse off in the shower first while the tub fills. Hannibal lights up candles and puts in scented oil - Will recognizes lavender and lemon - and turns out the lights. Will waits, feeling out of his depth, trusting that Hannibal will guide them both to where Will needs them to be.

The young man steps into the huge tub after Hannibal, and settles in between the older man's long legs. Running his hands over the doctor's lean and muscled thighs, Will rests against Hannibal's chest and feels the heat seep into his flesh. Hannibal allows him the liberty to explore; Will's fingers traces old scars and the one left by Tobias Budge.

"I'm rather nervous about it," Will admits shyly.

"That's natural," says Hannibal, one finger tracing the outer edge of Will's left ear and down his neck. It makes Will ticklish. "It is unknown to you."

Will shifts so that his head is on Hannibal's right shoulder. Hannibal laces the fingers of his left hand with Will's and rests his right arm around Will's waist, his hand just above Will's half-hard cock. "Have you ever... um. Of course you have. But were you always the, um, the top?"

"I enjoy both roles. There is something to be said for both giving and receiving," says Hannibal. "As long as my partner is enjoying himself, I have no qualms being fucked."

"Oh." Will wonders if the heat in his face is from the bath, from the unexpected vulgarity from his refined older lover, or from the sudden fantasy of him thrusting into Hannibal, coaxing soft grunts of pleasure from the older man. Hannibal would be looking up at him, watching and patient, and encouraging Will to move at a different angle, perhaps, or with more force- "Wow."

Hannibal licks Will's earlobe. "You're thinking about it, aren't you?"

"Uh, kinda. Okay, I was. But... I, um. I don't know. I'd thought you'd want to fuck me."

"I do," Hannibal replies bluntly. "I want to be enveloped by your body in the most intimate of ways. I want to overwhelm your senses until you are cognizant of nothing but our joining. I want to hear my name spill from your lips in a mindless, endless mantra, while I pleasure you and take my pleasure from you. I want to hear you give voice to your pleasure, until you have no more voice to give. I want you to lose all sense of time, until we are suspended in that fleeting eternity just before you climax."

Will shudders and moans softly. He is already fully hard; Hannibal's words are like fire and ice dancing along his nerves. "I could come from hearing you if you keep saying things like that."

Hannibal's right hand slides down between Will's legs and and cups his erection. "Mm. You could. That would help relax you for the preparations."

"What sort of preparations?" Will asks, though what he really wants to say is *Don't stop, don't ever stop.*

"You have never had penetrative sex, mon rêve, it will therefore be wise to take it slow. Days of prep," says Hannibal, whose hand has moved behind Will's testicles and is now gently pressing and caressing the perineum. "Fingers, toys."

Will doesn't realize his hips are moving until he registers the slow ripple of water. "Toys?"

"Plugs," says Hannibal. "Perhaps a vibrator. Get you used to the sensation first."

"But I want *you*," Will whines. Now his lover is rubbing a finger over his puckered hole, not pressing in or anything, merely touching; Will twitches with both nerves and excitement. "I want you in me."

Hannibal exhales and licks up Will's neck. "And I want to be in you, mon amour, but not at the expense of hurting you." His hand leaves the water and starts rubbing slow circles around and over Will's left nipple. The young man squirms and arches into the tantalizing caress.

"It was supposed to be your Christmas gift," Will manages to say without stammering. "I thought we could just, you know. Get right to it."

"We could, but I do enjoy extended foreplay, especially with you." The doctor switches over to the other nipple. "You're so beautifully responsive. It'll be a crying shame to ruin your first time with haste."

*****

Hannibal towels Will dry quickly and then shoos him to the bed to dry his hair, while Hannibal retrieves the lubricant to place on his pillow. He debates internally for a while, before pulling out two black-and-silver wrapped gifts from his dresser.

"What's that?" Will asks.

"Two of your Christmas gifts." Hannibal smirks. "I didn't think these'll be appropriate for the tree downstairs, in case we handed them to a guest by mistake."

Will blushes again. Hannibal will never be tired of flustering his lover; the spread of pink over his nose and cheeks gives him a cherubic air, even though the young man is clad in nothing and sporting an erection. The packages are opened carefully, Will folding the paper wrapping after he extracts the black wooden box within.

When he opens the first, he covers his mouth to hide his giggle. "Really, Hannibal? Silver?"

"It's stainless steel, actually," says Hannibal without missing a beat. "The other option was in 24k gold plating. I thought that would be extravagant for our first Christmas together."

"I shouldn't even look this up online, should I?" Will takes the steel object out, his bashful curiosity too sweet to ignore. Hannibal kisses Will while he runs his fingers over the length and fits his finger into the ring at the end of it. "This is, um. What is this called?"

"Mmm. I'd rather you don't do research on the brand. It's an anal plug." Hannibal takes it from Will and plays it along the inside of his thigh; Will trembles very faintly and bites his lower lip. Hannibal noses Will's ear and whispers, "Go on, the other one."

The other one is a sleekly contoured vibrator. Will just hides his face in Hannibal's chest, completely flustered. Hannibal extracts himself to put away the boxes and folded paper wrapping on a chair, and then returning to the bed, where Will has apparently decided to smother himself face down in a pillow. The two toys are beside him, innocently gleaming in the firelight.

The doctor admires the view for a moment. Warm golden-red light flickers over Will's smooth skin, no longer darkened with bruises and even the few scars are no longer as obvious; the lean runner's legs; the curve of his ass. Hannibal won't lie; he would be sorely disappointed if Will continued to hold out, which is why he bought these gifts, to steer Will's thoughts to that area. Thankfully Will is similarly eager.

When he gets on the bed, Will rolls towards him, but still does not meet his eyes. The toys lie between them.

"So, um," Will begins, lashes fluttering as he blinks and tries to formulate questions, "h-how are we going to, uh, you know. Go about this?"

"Do you trust me?" asks Hannibal, brushing curls from Will's eyes.

The young man smiles, bashful and awkward. "Yeah."

"I will bring you pleasure, mon amour," Hannibal promises, bending over to lick across Will's lower lip.

*****

It's easier to pretend this is just one of their usual nights after Hannibal puts the toys aside. Will lies against the headboard and luxuriates in the older man's clever touches, skimming

down his ribs and flanks, insinuating a thigh between his legs for Will to rock against gently. When Hannibal pulls away to readjust their positions, Will burbles a protest. It is quickly silenced when Hannibal dips his head to suck on Will's neck, down to his nipple, licking wetly from one to the other, his wicked tongue and teeth never keeping the same pressure long enough for Will to adjust to the sensations.

The psychiatrist lingers until Will is clutching at the sheets, and then slides lower, leaving open-mouthed kisses along Will's torso. The young man erupts into giggles when Hannibal flicks his tongue into his belly button, unable to contain his mirth, until Hannibal takes hold of Will's cock and licks a wet stripe all the way to the tip, and takes it into his mouth in one fluid motion.

Will chokes on a gasp, all laughter suddenly forgotten; Hannibal is extremely skilled at oral, and Will's legs part further to give space for his lover to work. It's almost disconcerting how easily Hannibal can take Will's erection all the way in, but Hannibal has had more lovers and thus more practice. Will tries not to be jealous of those who have seen Hannibal like this: silvery-blond hair hanging in his eyes, absolutely sinful mouth stretched around an erection. The hunger in Hannibal's gaze is for him alone, Will realizes with a start, and he can't look away. His mouth feels dry.

Hannibal is gazing at him like he is the only person in the world, which, at the moment, is exactly how Will feels about his lover. He licks over his lower lip, wishing he could taste Hannibal as well. The older man traces the vein on Will's cock with his tongue, then slides his mouth lower to press his mouth against the perineum. Will has to shut his eyes when he feels Hannibal licking at his hole. It's almost too much, knowing that Hannibal has an especially exquisite palate; Will can't help the deep moan when Hannibal returns his attention to his cock.

Just as Will thinks he's about to come, Hannibal pulls away to grab the lubricant. Will whines, but sees from the corner of his eyes that Hannibal has also taken one of the toys.

Will tenses. Hannibal only murmurs something in French, and gets back to where he was earlier, nibbling on the soft skin on Will's inner thighs, carefully bending Will's legs to kiss his bony ankles. His strong fingers knead into Will's calves and up the legs, until he is cupping and kneading Will's ass. It drives the breath from Will's chest, feeling his lover spoil him.

"Will it hurt?" Will finds himself asking. His voice doesn't sound like his own, all breathy and tremulous.

"Not if we're careful," says Hannibal. His accent is deliciously thick now. "and I'll need you to relax."

*****

Hannibal's need to bury himself in his lover is palpable. His pulse has picked up - not surprising - and he wants nothing than to take control of Will, to draw cries of pleasure from that lovely throat. It is only the constant thrumming reminder that Will has never done this before that keeps Hannibal from doing what he wants. Will deserves proper pampering.

His mouth seeks out Will's while his fingers tugs playfully on Will's pubic hair, drawing startled exclamations from his lover.

"Not good?" Hannibal asks.

"It's... it's good," says Will, looking dazed.

Hannibal hums and resumes kissing the young man, before he sits back on his heels. He bends Will's knees and kisses both knees while he lubricates his fingers. Will is staring at him, lips parted, caught between nervousness and desire. Hannibal slathers more into his palm, and gives Will a few slow strokes, and then slides the warmed lubricant down. Evidently apprehensive, Will fidgets and his hands clutch the sheets tightly. He looks as though he's holding his breath.

"Breathe out, Will," Hannibal says, and circles Will's puckered opening with his finger. With his other lovers he had used a glove, but he wants to have nothing between him and Will. Then his lover obeyed, Hannibal slowly inserts his finger, and kisses the inside of Will's knee in reassurance.

*****

It feels weird.

Will knows that, theoretically, he should be feeling more than 'weird', but that it is the only word that comes to him. Hannibal doesn't seem put off, though, his finger sliding in and out slowly, pausing only to add more lube and then one more finger.

The sensation changes from 'weird' to 'not so bad'; Will feels the lightning-quick flare of *something* dart up his spine. There is a stretching feeling of being full down there, but his nerves are singing.

"Hannibal?" he says, but he doesn't know what to say.

"Relax, mon amour, I have you."

As the older man thrusts his finger in more deeply, Will feels his skin prickling. It's a good sensation, if new, and when Hannibal leans up to kiss Will on his mouth, jaw and neck, Will can almost forget that his lover has two fingers inside him.

Then Hannibal crooks his fingers and brushes against something inside Will.

"Oh!" Will blinks and inhales shakily. "Wha-"

"You like that?"

"Yes - oh my god-" Will tenses and his hands dig more frantically into the sheets. "God, Hannibal, that's-nnnggh, Hannibal, I-*fuck!*"

*****

Will's surprised reaction to prostate stimulation is very gratifying. Hannibal doesn't let up, pressing and thrusting against the gland while his lover curls forward and clutches his shoulder. Will is panting, eyes glazed, and it is a delectable sight. Hannibal grasps Will by the back of his neck and drinks in his moans, even as his lover shudders and whimpers with every insistent thrust.

Just when Will is about to climax, Hannibal stops. He withdraws his fingers to a round of cursing.

"Hush now, I intend to have fun tonight," Hannibal says, his voice deepened to a growl. "I will make it worth your while, mon rêve."

The sound of his voice seems to settle Will. In the golden flicker of firelight, the sheen of perspiration over Will makes him look gilded; Hannibal pulls him in for another deep kiss that draws a long, soft moan from the young man.

Then Hannibal slicks up the vibrator and slowly inserts it, his eyes never leaving Will's face. It takes a few thrusts and a slight adjustment in angle before he sees the sudden flare in Will's eyes and the startled gasp. Hannibal then turns the toy on to its smallest setting; the buzzing is drowned out by Will's cursing.

Hannibal switches to a higher setting and Will practically wails, falling back onto the mattress with a cry. The older man pumps the toy steadily in and out of his lover, never once looking away from Will's face, drinking in all his expressions.

"Hannibal, I need- Hannibal, please, please, I want to come, help me," Will babbles, blindly reaching for the doctor. "Please Hannibal, touch me, I can't- I need to, I need-"

How can he resist? Hannibal surges forward and captures Will's mouth. He leaves the toy and grasps Will's neglected cock, stroking it with ruthless efficiency. His lover's hands leave the sheets and clutch at Hannibal, short blunt nails digging into his skin. Will cries out with the first touch on his erection, his voice rising steadily with every stroke, hitching when Hannibal swipes his thumb over the steadily leaking tip.

"That's it, mon rêve, let me hear you, don't hold back now," Hannibal urges. His hand speeds up and Will's tone take on a new urgency, suddenly breaking into a choked scream as he wrenches his head to the side and climaxes, emptying himself into Hannibal's hand and onto his own belly.

*****

As he winds down from his climax, Will shudders and whimpers a complaint when the vibrator is still buzzing in him; Hannibal tugs it out and tosses it aside, where it fell to the floor.

Then he registers that Hannibal is still hard and leaking against him. Will licks his lips and reaches out. "Let me-"

The doctor growls and flips Will onto his belly, straddling the back of his thighs, heedless of the sticky mess on Will's torso mucking up the sheets. Will cries out when he feels Hannibal's mouth sucking on the back of his neck, and the faint pressure of teeth; he feels the hot length of Hannibal's cock sliding into the slick space between his legs.

"Keep your ankles crossed," Hannibal orders in a low snarl.

Will goes pliant but tightens his knees and crosses his ankles. Hannibal's weight is a delicious burden, the sensation of Hannibal's cock thrusting between his thighs sending frissons of desire dancing up and down his spine. He thrusts his hips back experimentally and hears Hannibal's answering grunt. The slap of skin on damp skin should not be as arousing as it is. Will grabs Hannibal's hand, braced near his head, and the older man quickly links their fingers together. His mouth seeks out the same spot on the back of Will's neck and now Will definitely can feel the pressure of sharp teeth on his skin. To his shock, he *wants* Hannibal to bite down, leave a mark, and that longing startles a moan out of him.

It doesn't take long before Hannibal goes rigid against the back of Will's thighs; the young man feels the spread of heat between his legs and then the faint shudder and involuntary jerks of Hannibal's hip.

The older man rolls off Will, then pulls Will off their mess and onto himself.

"We need another shower," Will says, though he can't be sure he has bones left to support him.

Hannibal exhales and kisses the young man on the brow. "The shower can wait."

They lie together, satiated and warm. Will thinks he can't possibly be more contented.

*****

*****

Freddie Lounds can only blame herself for her impending death. The woman, on returning to Baltimore, immediately publishes an article on the body found eaten by feral dogs behind Will's old house, which she found only because she trespassed on Will's property. The police interviewed Will, but since Will has not been anywhere to his old house and has not been seen in the vicinity at all, they have nothing to go on.

"Who could have done it?" Will asks. He looks pale and distraught, for all that he and Robert Ashton has only met once.

Hannibal hugs his lover and says, "He might have annoyed the wrong person. Your house has been abandoned for so long, it could be just a site of convenience."

"It doesn't feel that way to me."

"Is that because it's where your father died?" Hannibal is deliberately callous in the statement, and Will turns to look at him. "I'm offering alternative ideas."

Will grimaces. "Could be. I don't know."

Hannibal soothes his agitated lover, and thinks of the sauce he will pair with Freddie Lounds' meat.

*****

She makes an appointment with Hannibal under a false name, two days before he is to host his party. When he sees her, he allows the session. It saves him the trouble.

"Dr Lecter, I hear you've stopped your consulting with the FBI," she says when she is seated.

"Yes, I have, but that is a personal matter. What do you wish to talk about?"

"I wish to talk about the reasons behind your decision," says Lounds.

Hannibal smiles. "I fear that is not the purpose of therapy, Ms Lounds. If you have no further interest in discussing your inner thoughts and work out whatever lingering issues you have, I suggest you stop wasting my time."

Lounds purses her lips. "Was it to do with Abel Gideon? I plan to visit him later. He can talk now."

"Then he can answer your questions about his personal life." Hannibal opens the door and waits. "Please."

As the redhead walks up to him, she says, "I should thank your little boyfriend though. I heard that Gideon originally wanted me to assist in Dr Chilton's surgery. Then again, it would have been quite a scoop. Is Will Graham amenable to an interview? A Christmas special sort of thing?"

"Stay away from Will." He stops her just before she is to step out the door. "I do wonder why you trespassed on Will's property though."

"I wanted to see what his living conditions were like before he met you, Dr Lecter," she says. "He's the real Cinderella story here, isn't he? Literally moving from rags to riches. Are you worried that he'll leave you when you're old?"

Hannibal smiles thinly, and strikes.

*****

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"Will?" Hannibal pokes his head into the study where Will is revisiting *A Christmas Carol*. "Let's go upstairs. We should get ready."

Will swallows the flutter of restlessness and follows his boyfriend to their bedroom for a quick shower. Hannibal has picked out their clothes; they both know that Will won't dress up in a suit for dinner, but given the company that Hannibal has invited, Will concedes to a fitted

red shirt over his jeans instead of his usual tee and flannel combination. Hannibal chose a charcoal gray shirt with thin silver stripes for himself.

Before Will can get dressed, Hannibal has him pinned to the wall, kissing him so thoroughly that Will half-considers just pushing them both down and having sex right there and then. As he mulls over the idea, Hannibal pulls away and then Will registers the wicked smile Hannibal is wearing.

"I know that look. What are you planning?" Will asks, narrowing his eyes.

Hannibal reaches over to the top of the dresser and dangles the stainless steel plug in front of Will. They have been using it over the past few days, almost two hours on Will's first try, and Will is getting used to the feeling of being filled there. He hasn't worn it today; he doesn't want to when there are strangers in the house.

Will's eyes widened. "Hannibal, no. There's other people. There'll be guests."

"A good test of self-control then."

"It's not a game, Hannibal." Will tries to harden his heart against the woeful, puppy-eyed gaze from his older lover. "I-I'm not falling for that."

More puppy eyes.

Will folds his arms. "I am *not*."

*****

It isn't torture but Will is reminded of it every time he moves. Hannibal, damn him, looks positively *edible.* The shirt outlines his broad shoulders in an almost indecent manner and Will has to force himself to focus on small talk to ignore his boyfriend's charms.

The dress code is apparently smart casual, something very different from his usual dinners, according to Mrs Komeda when she arrives with a dozen or so boxes. Will piles them under the tree where Hannibal has already put their gifts. He originally kept his presents upstairs, not wanting to lump his cheap gifts with those that Hannibal undoubtedly spent a fortune on, but Hannibal brought them down that morning and Will had left them where they are.

"You look utterly adorable," she says, accepting Will's shy kiss on her cheek after he takes her coat. "I suppose you found a present for him?"

"Um, yes," says Will.

"Is it my idea?"

"Uh... Kind of?" Will can't help the blush. "But I got him something else too."

Mrs Komeda laughs and pats his hand. "The benefit was a huge success. I'll have the money transferred to your account tomorrow."

"Money?"

"It is a benefit for young musicians, darling. Most of it is going to fund the orchestra's youth programs, but since you're not part of their programs I thought it best to reserve some for your college fees. Three thousand dollars."

Will's eyes widen. "Three thousand?" he whispers.

"Too little?" Mrs Komeda smiles wryly. "I can negotiate for more, though it will be difficult.

"No, it's, uh, it's more than... I-I've never even had three hundred in savings before. I don't even *have* a savings account." Will is trying to process the information.

Hannibal chooses that moment to greet her. She tuts at the older man. "You didn't set up a bank account for Will? Shockingly negligent, Hannibal."

"It slipped my mind. I shall do it once they're open for business." Hannibal kisses her on the cheek as well. "Mr and Mrs Frucht are already inside."

"I haven't seen them in ages! That's fantastic, Hannibal, thank you." Mrs Komeda swans off to speak with the Fruchts, while Hannibal helps Will to put away the coat.

Will is still a little stunned. Hannibal peers at him. "Is everything all right, Will?"

"I, uh, I'm trying to... Three thousand dollars." He shakes himself. "For... for playing four pieces?"

Hannibal pulls him in for a quick kiss. "Too little?"

"No! I mean, why? I didn't expect... I mean, sure, a small payment for the work, but three thousand?"

"I suspect part of that is due to the generosity of Mrs Komeda herself," says Hannibal gently. "Does the money bother you?"

Will chews on his bottom lip. "I guess it's just... I-I mean, it's unexpected. And I only got her that pathetic music box."

"It is a lovely music box, Will, and she will appreciate it." Hannibal pats his hair. "Come on. You're the host too."

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Most of the guests have left and Will is feeling a lot more relaxed. He has enjoyed himself for much of it, particularly when discussing modern American composers with Mrs Saari and her daughter Elizabeth, but the feeling that he is constantly scrutinized makes his skin feel itchy. Hannibal didn't help either; throughout dinner, his foot kept sliding up and down Will's shin, making him squirm and reminding him of the plug he's wearing.

"Thank you, Hannibal, Will, it was a lovely time." A pink-cheeked Dr Bloom hugs them both. She drank a lot of beer. "Thank you, Will, for the present."

"It's not much," says Will bashfully. "I hope you like it."

"She'll love it." Beverly does one better and plants a kiss on both of them. "And doc, you cook divinely. If you ever tire of psychiatry and turn to running a restaurant, I'll quit my job to be your manager."

"You're not allowed to quit, Beverly Katz, I'm already short-handed," says Jack mock-severely. He was quiet for most of the meal; he told Hannibal that Bella is determined not to undergo treatment, which is leading to some very tense conversations at home. Hannibal has given him and his wife a multicolored Murano glass vase, along with an art print of the Italian seaside. It pleases Hannibal to both bring up their sweetest memories and to dig the knife in a little further; he wants Jack unbalanced and unfocused.

Mrs Komeda is the last and Hannibal helps her with her coat. "Thank you Hannibal, it was such a pleasure, even without the usual theatrics. Tomorrow, 2pm, yes?"

"Of course, Mrs Komeda," says Hannibal genially.

Once the door is closed, Will sags against the wall and sighs. "Finally."

"Was it that bad?" asks Hannibal. The hired staff are already finished with the majority of the clean-up and have gone. The doctor pulls Will close and skates his hand down over Will's ass, and nudges the plug on purpose.

Will yelps and then smacks Hannibal. "Stop that," he hisses, cheeks flaming red.

"I thought it distracted you quite well from the boring parts of the evening." Hannibal is unrepentant. Seeing Will flustered has become a source of delight.

Will may not have noticed it, but since they started having sex, and more recently with the use of toys, he has started to move in a manner that is almost feline in grace and sensuality. Gone is the coltish nervousness and shying away at the start of their acquaintance; Will Graham now moves like a fledgling predator. It makes him long to bring Will into the other part of Hannibal's world, see if Will can adapt and grow into something even more beautiful.

Still, Hannibal is content with this. His young lover takes them to the sitting room, the fairy lights twinkling. A jazzy carol finishes on their sound system - Will set it up for tonight, and they have enjoyed an eclectic mix throughout the evening - and now Etta James is crooning *At Last.* Hannibal pulls Will into his arms and they start swaying to the music.

"At last my love has come along," Will sings along, low and husky, his lips against Hannibal's throat. "My lonely days are over..."

"... and life is like a song," Hannibal joins in. Will huffs softly. The doctor doesn't think much of his own voice, but Etta James' is warm and sultry, enveloping them with tenderness. They

sing together, quiet and hushed, dancing slowly to the song. "You smile and then the spell was cast. And here we are in Heaven..."

Both of them draw back just enough to look into each other's eyes. "For you are mine at last."

"That was so sappy." Will grins, warm and full of yearning. His eyes are glistening, sparkling in the fairy lights. The grin fades to a tender smile, and he sings again, "For you are mine at last."

Hannibal just kisses him. There are no words in any of the languages he speaks that can express all he feels for his Will.

*****

It feels like he's been groped and kissed forever before Hannibal finally rolls Will onto his back and removes the steel plug to push more lubricant into him. Every touch makes his nerves jump. He feels like he is about to explode. Or implode.

It's finally going to happen, and Will wants nothing more than to feel his lover inside him. The slight edge of fear the first time has gone; Hannibal's idea of preparation for the past few nights have been to finger him until he begs for the vibrator, proceed to fuck him with the toy until he's incoherent with want, and that is when a few strokes will get him off.

Now there is no toy on the bed other than the one Hannibal just took out, and it's tossed carelessly over the foot of the bed to land with a thunk. The older man is staring down at Will with stark desire. Will imagines he is looking much the same. It feels as though he can't breathe.

"Hey there," Hannibal says, like he's confessing a dangerous secret.

"Hey yourself." Will reaches up to brush over Hannibal's cheeks. He tangles his hand into his older lover's hair and tugs him down for a kiss, his legs wrapping around Hannibal's waist. "Make love to me," he demands.

Hannibal nips at Will's lower lip, and then tease his tongue into Will's mouth. It deepens and Will moans as Hannibal runs a hand down his chest.

"You've been wanting this the whole night." The doctor's fingers reach down and slides easily into Will, the sound wet and dirty. "I could see you squirming."

"And like you weren't playing footsie with me?" Will teases, his hips shifting to get Hannibal to reach that spot inside him. The older man removes his hand and Will whines. "Hannibal..."

Hannibal stuffs a pillow under Will's hips. "Would you really rather have my hand?"

"God no," Will says with a breathless laugh. "Come on, Hannibal, come on."

"A little eager, aren't we?"

"Like *you* aren't." Will gasps when he feels the head of Hannibal's cock nudging his entrance. "Oh."

The older man smiles crookedly, the lines around his eyes deepening. Taking hold of himself, he thrusts in, slow and careful, watching Will closely for signs of discomfort.

Will's eyelids flutter and his breathing is shallow. "H-Hannibal, I-"

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No, don't, just- gimme a minute." The young man swallows dryly. His chest feels tight; it's beyond physical sensations now. "God, this is... Okay. Okay."

Hannibal curls forward and rests his head on Will's sternum. He pushes in further, deeper, and feels Will's hot body giving in to the intrusion. Will is tensing up beneath him, and he presses kisses over the young man's chest and up his neck, murmuring reassurances that it'll be fine, it's going to be good.

When he is fully seated into Will, both of them have to take deep breaths, Will to get used to the sensation of their joining and Hannibal to tighten the reins on his control.

He keeps himself very still, braced on his forearms, until Will tightens the vice of his legs around Hannibal's hips and tilts himself up further. The young man reaches up to grab Hannibal by his shoulders and drags him closer, kissing him clumsily.

"Move," Will orders with a rasp. His eyes are but pools of inky black with thin rings of blue, drawing Hannibal into their depths. "Move, dammit."

Hannibal bares his teeth and rocks his hips forward sharply, driving the breath out of Will. His lover cries out when Hannibal makes a minute adjustment and his fingers scrape down his back. The doctor imagines Will drawing blood from his skin, leaving his own mark; he buries his face into Will neck and inhales, surrounds himself with the sweet scent and debauched cries as he thrusts harder and faster.

"Hannibal, Hannibal, please, god, Hannibal-" The words become senseless pleas, spilling forth as a mantra. His vision sparks. His world narrows to this moment, this scent, this *feeling* of being claimed: there is only Hannibal, Hannibal, Hannibal.

The older man does not say a word, but his tongue sweeps around Will's ear and dips into it, overloading Will's senses with stimulation and the young man gasps for air as his cries hitch on every thrust. Hannibal's breath is hot against his neck and ear, his skin slick with sweat; Will rocks against his lover and reaches down to touch himself, but Hannibal snarls and shoves Will's hand away.

"Mine," he growls, wrapping his strong and clever hand around Will's cock. Their rhythm does not falter as he shifts his weight and looks straight into Will's wide, unseeing eyes. Hannibal's focus is on him inside Will, him around Will. He knows his breathing is heavier as he pushes Will inexorably towards that moment of freefall; every inhale fills him with the mingled scent of Will and his own body, of sex, of lust.

By now Will has lost his ability to form words, gasping and begging with keening cries trapped in his throat. Hannibal adds a slight twist on the upstroke and Will is *gone*, lost in a shuddering, broken cry, his eyes open and wild and breathtakingly beautiful. Still stroking Will as he rides out his climax, Hannibal waits until there is a faint sense of cognizance in his young lover's eyes before he gives in to his own pleasure.

Will feels Hannibal's teeth on his shoulder as the older man thrusts harder, his right hand now free to grip Will's hip closer to himself. He curls his hands into Hannibal's hair and tugs, his nails scratching into Hannibal's scalp, and the doctor chokes out Will's name before his spine goes rigid. His hips stutter and tenses as he empties into Will's body. Will keeps running his hands over Hannibal's shoulder and back while his lover gathers his composure.

Hannibal doesn't let his body weight rest on Will for too long, but he does lick over the mark his teeth made and then kisses Will somewhat clumsily before he rolls off of the young man.

Will grins. He felt sore and sated. The mess on his belly is going to dry into a flaky, itchy mess if he doesn't clean off, but his legs feel rubbery.

Lying on his side, Hannibal smiles at Will. "Hey there," he drawls.

"Hey yourself," Will replies, and flicks Hannibal's nose. "You look smug."

"False modesty is worse than arrogance, mon amour," says Hannibal, capturing Will's hand and nibbling on his fingers. Then he leans in and kisses the young man lazily. "I love you."

"I love you. Merry Christmas."

"Mm. This is the best Christmas present I have ever received." Hannibal skims his hands over Will's belly and playing with the sticky ejaculate on his skin. "I'll have to make it last all year, hmm?"

"You'll have to make it last your whole life," says Will.

"My Will," Hannibal exhales wistfully. "I wish I could watch you grow old."

Will feels emotion tightening his throat. He clasps hands with Hannibal, and presses his lips to the older man's knuckles; this is the gulf that separates them, and one that neither can bridge.

Chapter End Notes

Yay, intercourse! After 14 long chapters, they're finally getting to it.
At Last
In case you were wondering, Hannibal bought these for Will:
EARL: the Most Distinguished Gentleman's Plug in the World

ISLA The Sleek & Seductive Vibrator for Deep Sensations

Funnest research I have EVER done :)

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It isn't even six o'clock when Hannibal's phone rings.

"Oh God..." Will buries his head under his pillow and groans. "Sht it erf, Hnibl."

"Sorry, mon rêve. that's my emergency number." Hannibal reaches over and grabs his phone. Will peeks out from beneath the pillow; the doctor doesn't even sound sleepy, which feels patently unfair. "Hello?"

There is a spate of rushed talking on the other end.

Hannibal climbs out of bed and starts pulling on clothes. The person on the phone sounds agitated - a woman, Will gathers dozily - and in less than ten minutes Hannibal is fully attired in a suit except for the tie. "Margot, where are you?... Come to my office, I'll meet you there- Margot? Margot!"

Will sits up. "Hannibal? What's wrong?"

"I have to go. My patient is in danger." Hannibal kisses Will briefly on the lips before he leaves.

*****

Since he has been roused by the phone call, Will sees no point in continuing to laze in bed. He is still quite sore, so his movements are not as fluid as they usually are.

Breakfasting without Hannibal feels lonely, more so now that they have actually had intercourse; he wonders whether this longing to be near Hannibal, this hunger for the older man will dissipate over time, or it will intensify until there is nothing but raw need to meld himself to Hannibal. Logic says the former, but desire claims the latter. Will satisfies himself with the pleasant thought that he will get to experience it all first-hand.

He finds himself singing *At Last* as he goes about grabbing a glass of apple juice and digging inside the fridge for leftovers from last night. As he places a Tupperware container on the counter, he accidentally knocks his drink off the counter and shatters the glass.

"Shit!" Will grabs a towel from the rack and crouches down carefully. "Damn it."

He picks up the larger pieces first and then notices the liquid flowing into the cracks of the floorboards. Then he hears the dripping. Is there a basement? Or perhaps there is a crawl space. Odd that Hannibal never mentioned it. Perhaps it is just for storage. Either case, Will is going to have to make sure he cleans up the place beneath him so that the juice won't attract ants or encourage mold. He sighs; this isn't how he pictured the morning after. In his imagination, Hannibal is making breakfast, like usual, only they have more shared smiles, or

perhaps Will would be able to persuade Hannibal to delay breakfast for other activities. He also pictures Hannibal cooking in only his apron - now that is a wonderful image to be savored at a later time, perhaps while in the shower with his lover. He can just about hear Hannibal's scandalized protests about sanitation issues and protecting the sanctity of his kitchen.

Still, first things first. Quickly picking up the shards of glass and mopping up the spilled juice, Will then looks for a means to get into the space below.

*****

Hannibal is too late; Margot is already in surgery when he arrives at the hospital, and her brother Mason is there leering gleefully.

"Dr Lecter, I presume?" says the older Verger. He sticks out a hand, as though they are chatting at a social function rather than waiting outside the ER. "Mason. Margot's brother."

"I've heard a lot about you," says Hannibal. He shakes the man's hand once and lets go.

"Such a shame we're meeting under these circumstances," Mason remarks casually. He is dressed expensively but carelessly, his coat stinking of pigs. "What a shame. I was looking forward to a little Verger, but I hear the doctors may not be able to save her child. She really shouldn't have gone driving in the wee hours of the morning, those irresponsible truckers drive like lunatics."

Seething inwardly, Hannibal merely purses his lips. "My only wish is for her to be safe. After all, she has improved greatly since she began therapy after the unfortunate incident at home. I care deeply for her."

"Enough to donate your sperm?" Mason's sneer is twisted and cruel, much like the man himself. "Given her preferences, I'm surprise she stayed still long enough."

Hannibal's entire being does not reveal a single flicker of disgust at Mason's crudeness. "I believe she acquired the sperm through ethical means, Mason. Possibly a donor clinic. I was informed of her pregnancy only at our last appointment."

"Huh." Mason's tone is evidently one of disbelief. Then again, the odious man is not one whom Hannibal needs in his life. "Anyhoo, she may need further care from you after this... traumatic accident. You might need to give her better counseling, Dr Lecter."

"It is always easier for patients whose families are supportive to overcome the challenges they face. I'm sure she will receive the right kind of support from her dear brother." Hannibal inclines his head and sits down to wait. Margot deserves that much from him, at least.

*****

Will misses the first step by accident and skids down the next four on his rear end in a painful series of thumps. He winces and rubs his lower back, his ass hurting a lot more than it ought

to. There is a light switch at the bottom and Will flicks it on to better see where the juice has spilled.

"Whoa." He blinks in the harsh white light. It's fairly bright.

The basement is colder and larger than expected. Will peers around at the clean space, and takes in the heavy rubber curtain shielding one part of it. There are sealed crates stacked on his left, while the gurgle of of the heaters can be heard echoing from the shadowy places behind the stairs, but the area behind the rubber curtain is intriguing. The spill forgotten for now, Will wanders forward, curious about what lies in that space.

The lights overhead are quite glaring, and bounces strange shadows off the walls. Will pushes aside the heavy rubber curtain. There is a long steel table, easily six and a half feet, with drains set into it, and what appears to be a large blast chiller as well as a refrigerator. Will glances at the various sized tools hung on pegboards on the left wall and then turns to the right, which is hidden behind yet more rubber curtains. Behind them, there's a shape that's mostly red and off-white that's oddly familiar, but the translucent rubber blurs it into a mass of color.

When he parts them to take a look, he forgets how to breathe.

*****

Margot is still in surgery; there seems to have been a complication. Hannibal checks his watch. He will need to return home by two for the delivery, and he needs to send Will out on a pretend errand for it to be a surprise when the young man gets home.

He smiles to himself in satisfaction at the recollection of the previous night. He has never really considered himself a romantic, yet Hannibal can't put away the images of them dancing and singing to Etta James in the sitting room, fire crackling in the fireplace and the fairy lights twinkling in the tree in the corner. He fixes the scene in Will's wing, and Etta James ready to sing whenever Hannibal steps into that corner of his mind.

Other memories he places in the bedroom, like gleaming gems together with Will's other firsts: Will's eager submission to him, urging Hannibal to claim his own. The sound of his Will's cries as he climaxed, his body clenching about Hannibal. A pigeon's blood ruby, next to the gleaming emerald of Will's first experience of oral sex, after the white pebble of their first kiss by the river. If he holds up the pebble, he can still hear the slow rush of the river and Will's voice reaching into the heavens, singing *Blue Skies*.

The softness in Will's lovely eyes in the afterglow can't be captured accurately; Hannibal comforts himself with the knowledge that he has more opportunities to try.

Mason Verger has given up the pretense of concern and has flounced off home. Hannibal is glad that the man is gone. If not for the fact that Margot needs Mason alive to have access to the family fortune, Mason would have died a long time ago. Hannibal has little patience for men who abuse their sisters, and take pride in senseless cruelty. The time is not yet ripe, however, and Hannibal thinks he will rather let Margot savor her revenge on the man who makes her life hell.

*****

Will stares at the Freddie Lounds.

Dead Freddie Lounds.

Half of dead Freddie Lounds

Will has stuffed his knuckles against his mouth. He knows that if he makes a sound now, he will start screaming and he doesn't think he will ever stop. He bites into his hand and the pain tells him that it's real, it's real, this is Hannibal's basement and he has Freddie Lounds' corpse - half of her corpse, anyway - sitting up, and her chest spread open, layer by layer, skin and flesh and bone, like pages of a book, held open by her own hands.

It's almost poetic, if not for the macabre medium.

He can't look away.

He steps backwards, one foot after another, until the rubber curtain is between him and Lounds again, and he keeps going backwards until his back hits the blast chiller. The impact knocks Will's fist from his mouth and his teeth scrapes over a knuckle, bloodying it.

If there is only half of her on display, where is the other half?

The thought springs unbidden and suddenly Will feels far colder than he ought to be. The chiller behind him beckons. Will turns around, feeling as though Freddie Lounds is going to start asking questions the way she does - did, used to, past tense, oh god - and opens the steel door.

*****

The operation is finally complete. Hannibal follows as they wheel Margot into a private ward; the head nurse knows Hannibal from the latter's years in the hospital, and once the doctors have left, Hannibal is allowed in as a favor.

"Her prognosis is not good," says Melissa McPherson.

"She lost the child," says Hannibal flatly.

Mother-of-four Melissa sighs, her large brown eyes dewy. "She also lost the ability to conceive another. You're her psychiatrist, so I hope you can help her through it."

"I hope so too." He studies the chart and takes note of the surgeon who did the operation. "I don't recognize the name. Did they transfer recently?"

*****

It is supremely ironic that Will feels safest wrapped up in their bed, Hannibal's scent all around him. His jaw aches from being clenched so tightly, and his fingers are digging crescent marks into his shins.

He's cleaned the spill up, only a fraction of his mind on what he's doing; he's swept up the glass fragments and mopped the floor. he even remembered to turn out the light and to shut the entrance carefully. If he hasn't known the door is there, he wouldn't see it.

But he can still see *her,* naked and open, and he can't help thinking that she looks *beautiful* now; the abrasiveness that she possessed in life, her callous determination to get her story has been removed, leaving only the shell of her being. The ugly spirit is gone.

What remains is Art.

He hates that he sees this.

He wants to be repulsed, but he feels only terror and awe. Fear and wonder battle for dominance inside him, each occasionally outweighing the other, but there is no sense of disgust or revulsion or hate. Even after what he finds in the chiller, he feels no nausea, and the fact that he is not throwing his guts up is giving him a minor breakdown. He wants to have the desire to vomit, to clear everything that Hannibal has ever fed him from his system, but all his body does is keep on working as it has before. His heart pumps. His lungs inflate and deflate. His blood flows.

His head hurts.

His phone is right by his hand. His first impulse on reaching the sanctity of the bedroom is to call Hannibal, and the absurdity of the concept jarred Will into this practically-catatonic state. He can hear his heartbeat, steady and strong; he can feel the smoothness of the sheets in its high-thread count luxury; he can see the armor that stands guard at the entrance, fathomless eyes that now reminds him of Hannibal last night, when Hannibal pushed into him and took him, his eyes were like that, dark and inscrutable, yet emanating an aura of protectiveness and power.

He dare not close his eyes for long, in fear of what he sees in the dark behind his eyelids. He tried, earlier downstairs, when it was almost too much for his mind to absorb, and all he could see was Hannibal calmly and expertly dissecting the corpse and plucking out organs into the vacuum packs for sealing, his arms red to the elbows. The same calm and expertise the doctor shows in the kitchen when he's performing culinary magic. It is a beautiful sight, Hannibal in his element.

Why does he still want to call Hannibal? Why does he want Hannibal to be here, to hold him and reassure him that everything will be fine, that Hannibal will take care of things? Why does he *ache* for the older man? He should be packing his bags and running. Or calling the cops. He buries his face in his knees. He should, but he does not want to.

Was this how Abigail felt when she realizes her father was killing those girls?

The phone rings and Will is jolted out of his morose thoughts. The caller-ID shows that it's Dr Bloom, and Will frees one hand to answer it.

"Will! Hey. I tried calling Hannibal but he didn't pick up, so I figured he's busy. Are you at home?" she asks brightly.

"Yeah, yes I am. Hannibal's..." Will swallows, the words 'a cannibalistic murderer' freezing at the tip of his tongue. He tries again. "Hannibal went out early this morning. An emergency with a patient."

Dr Bloom isn't a psychiatrist and Hannibal's friend for nothing. "*Will, are you all right? You sound... you sound odd.*"

"No, I'm-I'm fine. I just, uh. I-I guess I'm feeling a little... unsteady, that's all. What is it you wanted?"

"*Oh yes. I forgot to bring my presents for you two yesterday, so I'm dropping by with them. I'll be twenty minutes. Are you sure you're all right?*" Dr Bloom asks, her voice coloring with concern.

Will makes himself smile, hoping that will carry across in his tone. "It's nothing, I just... I kinda miss him, y'know. Um, I'll wait for you."

"*All right. We'll talk more when I get there.*"

*****

Dr Feng is absent from his office, but Hannibal enters anyway. He takes a name card, and seeing the other man's phone left on his desk, takes a quick look at his call history.

Hannibal frowns faintly when he sees a familiar number, and then exits the office, leaving no trace of his visit.

*****

"Hi. Merry Christmas." Dr Bloom is very pretty today in a floral dress. She hands two boxes wrapped in green to Will and he stares at them, not able to meet her eyes. "Left them in my car yesterday and they completely slipped my mind."

"Thank you."

"Thanks for the scarf, it's lovely. And you look kinda peaky," says Dr Bloom. "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing,: says Will, not wanting to think of the basement. Not thinking of Hannibal with blood up his arms as he- "It's... I-I, um. Never mind."

Dr Bloom pats his shoulder comfortingly. "Is it about Hannibal?"

He knows he could tell her, and he also knows he will never tell her. However, she is perceptive in her own way and he isn't going to be able to dodge her questions for long. He settles for a small nod.

"We, uh, finally m-made love last night," he mutters, a flush coming into his cheeks and he fixes his gaze on her shoes, "and, um. I was hoping he'd be around this morning. I'm not, I don't know."

"You don't want to be the clingy boyfriend but you'd have liked him to be here?" Dr Bloom smiles crookedly. At least she doesn't sound offended or upset that he and Hannibal have finally done the deed.

Will shuffles his feet. "I know it was an emergency. It's just really bad timing. And I got to thinking, and I just- My thoughts."

She bounces on her heels. "Ran away with you?" When he nods, she adds, "It happens. But you know how Hannibal feels about you, right?"

"I do." Will hugs his middle. That is the worst bit about all this. He knows Hannibal does feel strongly for him. He thinks Hannibal loves him, the older man has said so often enough. "I guess it's just my brain trying to sabotage myself. It often does."

"You know you can always call your friends or me if you need help, right?"

Will makes himself smile. It feels false. "Um. I do have a favor to ask."

"What is it?"

"I want to see Abigail Hobbs. Today."

Dr Bloom look at him oddly. "Did Hannibal tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"You are on her visitor's list." She folds her arms. "In actual fact, I am going to visit her today. You can come along with me."

*****

Abigail's sentencing hearing isn't for a week still, the delay primarily due to her recovering from her father's attack. Will can tell that jail has hardened the girl considerably. She is flinty and cold, though her surprise shows. They sit together in the visiting room and Abigail stares at both of them.

"What's this? Will Graham visiting as my Christmas present?"

"I heard you wanted to talk with me," Will says. There is a brittleness that makes him edgy, and the atmosphere in the room makes his skin want to crawl off his flesh. He thinks it is the hunger for outside communication that every other person in the room has; he wants out of here.

Abigail smirks. "I've wanted to talk with you for the past three months, Will Graham. You didn't care then."

"I care now." He keeps his tone civil. It is a challenge.

Dr Bloom clears her throat. "I shall be at the vending machines."

Will studies Abigail and she scrutinizes him in turn. She tilts her head, revealing the neat, brutal scar. "You look good. Better than in the newspaper photos."

"My boyfriend takes care of me." Will's fingers pull at his jeans and he stares at a stain on the table before he forces himself to look at Abigail's face, just below her eyes.

"Your boyfriend killed my father."

"Can't say I feel too badly about that," says Will. "Why did you tell your dad about me?"

"So direct? I hoped we could catch up. What happened in school, who's this year's Winter Dance king and queen."

"I don't want to waste time with small talk."

"You wouldn't have been missed by many," she says bluntly. "And you did lend me the umbrella. I just had to tell the truth to get him off my back."

Will clenches his fists. "So you did want me dead."

"I didn't want you dead. I didn't want anyone dead. I just wanted me alive more," she says. "Given the choice..."

"You chose yourself over the other girls?"

Abigail does not admit to it. She does smile slightly, however, and leans forward. "I think you owe me thanks."

"For what? For your dad killing mine?" Will snorts. "I don't feel particularly grateful."

"Your dad's death meant you have a new life." She gestures at him: his clothes, his health. "We get to read the news in here. I don't like him."

"Is that why you wanted to talk to me? To hear me express my gratitude? Your father was a murdering cannibal, Abigail Hobbs, and he would've killed and eaten me. I don't have any gratitude for that." Will bares his teeth. "And he doesn't need you to like him. I don't need you to like him."

"He killed my father."

"Your father killed mine."

"Dad wouldn't have eaten you," Abigail says, a quiet confidence in her tone. "He wouldn't have wanted to honor you."

"The way he honored the other girls?" He ignores the desire to strangle the girl. He mimics her posture and says, "And you honored the girls as well?"

"He would've killed me otherwise."

"Don't lie to me," he snarls. "You don't get to do that. You could've told somebody, right from the start. You didn't. Why not?"

Abigail glances at Dr Bloom, standing near the vending machines and looking at them. She is far away and won't overhear.

"She's the only one who ever comes," says Abigail. "Not even my best friend has visited. And she was the one who found me bleeding out in the kitchen. I hadn't told, and he slashed me in the throat. If I had told..."

"Quit playing the scared little lost girl card with me. You're a hunter. Fear would have cost you your prey," Will scoffed. He's done with her games. "You're not stupid, and neither am I. Try honesty, Abigail, it's the best policy."

She narrows her eyes and stares at him coldly. She's a proud young woman, he realizes, and both of them know that this pride will be worn away in jail. She's putting on a show now while she can. Will does not feel more charitable towards her for that. "Then what do you want me to say?"

"How did you feel when you realized he was killing those girls so that he doesn't kill you?" he asks softly. "How did it feel, *honoring* the kills?"

"It made me feel *special,*" Abigail whispers. Once she says that, she stands abruptly, her hands flat on the table, and adds, "Merry Christmas. Don't come again."

*****

Dr Bloom is understandably concerned about what the two young people talked about, but all Will told her was Abigail's hatred towards him and Hannibal.

"She's a scared, lonely young woman," says the lovely psychiatrist.

Will's lip curls. "She knew all along what she was doing, what her father was doing. I think it's fair to assume she's more than scared and lonely."

"I can't help thinking that I've failed her somehow," she confesses bitterly. "For all that I barely know her."

"Not everyone can be helped." He pulls on the sleeves of his coat. "Not everyone can be saved."

Dr Bloom makes a sound of disagreement. "No one is irredeemable, Will."

"Some people don't want saving, Dr Bloom," says Will, quiet and hollow. He hugs himself again, and rests his head against the window. They don't speak on the way back to Will's home.

*****

Hannibal is surprised that Will isn't waiting at home, and he isn't answering his phone. Concern gnaws at him, but then Will's Christmas gift arrives and Hannibal busies himself with supervising the crew for the next hour.

Will arrives in Alana's car near sunset just as the crew leaves. "What's up with the workmen?"

"Hey there," says Hannibal, pulling his lover into a kiss, and seeing Alana parked on the road. "Alana! Where have you two been?"

Alana hops up the few steps. "We went to visit Abigail."

"The Hobbs girl?" Hannibal frowns and peers at Will. "Whatever for?"

"She's been asking for me," says Will, not looking at him. "And I thought, 'tis the season. We talked." He exhales. "I don't think I'll go back again."

Behind Will, Alana grimaces and mouths, *Didn't go well.* Aloud she says, "I have to go. Beverly's parents are arriving tonight and I'm supposed to demonstrate how good a cook I am."

"You are a good cook, Alana," says Hannibal, and kisses her on the cheek. She smells of cherries and baking, together with the stale smell of prison.

"I had a great mentor." She grins at him impishly. "Hey, Will? Call me anytime you need to talk."

"Of course, Dr Bloom."

"I think you can call me Alana by now. Bye Hannibal, bye Will." She smiles. "Have a great Christmas."

*****

Will is oddly reticent, even for him. He goes to the sitting room and curls up on the sofa, his eyes seemingly glazing over as he stares at the wall. Hannibal watches his lover and wonders what the girl has said to Will to affect him so.

"Will? Why don't you come with me?" Hannibal says after a while, offering his hand to help Will stand up.

The young man blinks languidly and then looks past the hand at Hannibal, his face devoid of expression. Then, as though someone is filling him up on the inside with his soul, emotion flickers in his eyes. He grasps Hannibal's hand with more strength than expected, and when he is on his feet, pulls the doctor into a punishing kiss.

When they part for breath, Hannibal is confused. "What's wrong, Will?"

"I missed you today," says Will, smiling sadly. Then he exhales and adds, "How is your patient?"

Hannibal sighs. "She'll live."

"Life is precious," Will remarks. "No one should waste it."

"You're right, of course. Come with me, Will." The older man pulls and twists one of the dark chocolate curls that seem persistently determined to hang in his lover's eyes. He leads Will to the study and then waits for Will to open it. "Merry Christmas, mon amour. I hope you don't mind that it's secondhand."

*****

Will can only stare.

The Blüthner baby grand that he has practiced on and fallen in love with now takes pride of place in the study. The other pieces of furniture have been shifted around, and perhaps something has been moved out, but Will can only see the exquisite instrument before him.

"Why..."

Hannibal places his hands on Will's waist and nuzzles his left ear. "Mrs Komeda's daughter is buying herself a new one in Australia, and no one in the house plays this. I offered to purchase it for you. Do you like it?"

Will can't even formulate words. He moves towards the piano, hesitant as he had been the first time he laid eyes on it. His heart is thumping heavily in his chest and he runs his tongue over his suddenly dry lips. He wants this, *he wants this* with a yearning so strong it hurts like he's stabbed. All the emotions of the day suddenly flood his throat and his control frays; he grabs for the last fluttering strands of restraint and bites his knuckles before he blurts out anything stupid.

*****

"Is everything all right, Will?" Hannibal asks. His lover has been standing stock still and silent for almost five minutes, his fist braced against his mouth. "Do you not... Do you not like this?"

He can practically hear the young man try to control his breathing. Will fails, however; there is a slight hitch when he inhales, like he is about to cry.

"I love it," Will says brokenly. He swivels around and hugs Hannibal. "I love you. I love you so much."

"I love you too," says Hannibal. "Will, what's wrong? What did Abigail say?"

"She's not important. Whatever she said is not important." Will starts kissing Hannibal, fierce and desperate attacks of lips and teeth and tongue.

Hannibal reciprocates gladly until he feels wetness on his cheeks. He pulls away, and is concerned when Will twists his face away, trying to hide his tears. "Will, what's wrong? Why are you crying?"

"Nothing, it's nothing," Will tries to say, but now that the tears have broken through the dam they refuse to stop. "It's all right, Hannibal, there's nothing wrong. I just - I'm overwhelmed. it's too much with this, with you. I'll b-be okay."

"You can't possibly be okay if a present has startled such a reaction, Will. What happened with Abigail?"

*****

Will wants to tell him that, let him think that it is his conversation with the girl that is causing his emotional turmoil. Lie to him. However, he just clutches Hannibal silently and buries his face into the older man's waistcoat. He inhales the scent of cologne and antiseptic, and beneath all that the scent that is Hannibal, something that should be monstrous and frightening but calms and centers him. Hannibal feels like the one real person in all the world, while all the others, including himself, are shadows.

He knows then what he has to do.

He lets out his breath and straightens. His touch is exceedingly tender as he caresses Hannibal's face. "I wrote you something. I was gonna play it at the benefit, but I only wanted you to hear it, and I can't play the harpsichord, so I wrote it down for you to play when you want to. I wasn't... I didn't expect this."

"We have a piano now," Hannibal points out, brushing away the tear stains on Will's face.

"Do you want to hear it?"

"Of course, mon amour."

Will takes a seat. When his fingers lift the cover, he almost tears up again. He loves the Blüthner, loves its complex tone, the way the notes sing out of its frame and brightens the air around it. He loves it because Hannibal first heard him played on it; the synchronicity of the moment rips his heart open, just a little more. It feels like he is playing a dirge for their relationship.

He wants to rage at God for taking all the good things in his life and warping them into the bad. If there is a God at all, why did Will have to love a father who so wanted to forget Will's existence? Why did he have to lose his dad because of a simple act of kindness? Why does Hannibal have to be a murderous cannibal?

He wants to tear it all apart, but the rage evaporates when he sees Hannibal across the piano, expectant, worried, affectionate. All Will feels is a terrible love for the man and utter exhaustion with the shit show that is his life.

This should have been done at night, he thinks wearily. *At midnight.* He would have played it after they have made love again, and Hannibal would come from their bedroom to see where Will has gone. But it is sunset now, and Will supposes it is appropriate enough a metaphor.

His hands fall on the keys, and instead of the romantic serenade he originally wrote, the melody that emerges is plaintive and poignant. For the two and a half minutes, he lets his fingers say what his mouth cannot. As he plays the last few notes, he prays silently for strength to end it all with the least hurt to Hannibal.

Hannibal is silent, not applauding. Perhaps he has heard Will's feelings, the way he heard everything Will put into the pieces at the benefit. Perhaps he has also come to the same conclusion.

Will closes the lid of the piano and Hannibal comes to stand behind him, large, strong hands resting on his shoulders. The young man relaxes and leans back against his older lover, finally accepting what he has to do.

"I love it," the doctor says sincerely, and kisses the top of Will's head. "Thank you."

Will holds on to Hannibal's hand. It feels so natural; he doesn't want to let go ever again. "I'm glad you like it."

"Tell me what's troubling you."

It's obvious, isn't it? Will can't lie, not through his music, and he doesn't intend to anyway. There is a faint flutter of terror in his stomach for himself. He knows Hannibal now, knows him as the man he loves and a monster he should fear, but more than that he realizes how hard this ordeal will be for Hannibal. How lonely he is going to be, again; lonelier, now that they have been together, that they have fallen in love.

"Hannibal," Will begins, and then finds that he'll rather face the older man than hide like a coward from the sight. He stands and turns around, taking Hannibal's left palm to cup his own cheek. Hannibal's burgundy eyes are inscrutable and fathomless; Will senses curiosity and concern behind the gaze. He can feel the scar across his palm resting across the back of the doctor's hand. "Hannibal, I love you. So much so that... that it scares me."

"You have nothing to fear from me, mon rêve," Hannibal says.

Will wants to laugh. Instead he presses his lips to the corner of the man's sensual mouth, selfishly taking the tenderness as a final gift. Now is the time for honesty.

"I accidentally broke something in the kitchen today. A glass of apple juice."

"Are you hurt?"

Will shook his head, and moves Hannibal's hand to the base of his throat. His pulse flutters against the heat of the doctor's palm, and then slows down. There is a subtle darkening of the older man's gaze but he makes no move to withdraw his hand. Will finds that comforting.

"I found your basement, Hannibal. I found Freddie Lounds," he says. Then he meets Hannibal's blank gaze, and adds, "I haven't told anybody."

The grip on his neck tightens.

"Hannibal?" Will murmurs, feeling his airway starting to constrict.

"Will." It's the same tone as when Hannibal stared down at Will last night, just before he entered Will's body and made Will his own. It's fitting, in a way. "What is it?"

"I won't fight back, I promise." Will's smiles faintly. Hannibal blinks, slow and almost inhuman. Will's quivering fingers touch the older man's lips, which part involuntarily. "Please. Don't hate yourself for having to do this."

Chapter End Notes

I made myself cry writing the last bit. I hate me.
I realize I like to kill Freddie Lounds in my fics. But I detest her character so...
Kudos to Lara Jean Chorostecki for her very convincing portrayal, she's a top-rate actress. But I still dislike Freddie intensely.
Will's song is actually Christophe Beck's Close Your Eyes , a piece I have loved since I first heard it on Buffy.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I found your basement, Hannibal. I found Freddie Lounds."

The words blindside him, leave his mind reeling.

Even now Hannibal barely registers the tentative caress on his mouth. His grip on the bared throat tightens; he feels Will swallowing, feels the pulse thrumming beneath pale skin. He moves without thought, driving Will to the floor next to the piano bench with a painful thud, both hands closing over his throat, ready to bear down with his full force to prevent struggling. The impact forces air out of Will and his hands fly to Hannibal's wrists.

Instead of trying to wrest his lover's hands from his throat, Will only holds on, his dimming gaze never leaving Hannibal's face even as the doctor puts more pressure into the stranglehold, until his blue eyes start rolling back in his head. His mouth is open, instinctively trying to gulp air into desperate lungs, but even then his grasp around Hannibal's wrists are lax.

As though he intends Hannibal to kill him.

As though he just wants skin contact before he dies.

-Will staring up at me, laughing and bashful, in our bed, his curls a dark halo around his beautiful face, the color high in his cheeks-

-she was perfect. I lost her.-

-don't hate yourself for having to do this-

-Will at the recital hall, seeking me out-

- I do want this. Us.-

-grief never does leave you-

-Liebestraum No. 3-

-you're not going to throw me away, are you?-

-the white pebble in Will's palm, the moon plucked from the sky just for me-

-I will not lose you, not after we have found each other-

In a sudden burst of clarity Hannibal sees how his fear has played Iago, urging death to his willing Desdemona. He releases Will with an abrupt gasp of breath and falls back to lean

against the bench, his fingers digging his pants with remnant strength. His heartbeat thunders in his ears, deafening in a manner he has not felt for decades. His hands feel like they've burned to a char; the air crackles with ice and snow, the scent of fir heavy in his nose.

Freed from the killing trap of Hannibal's hands, Will coughs life into his lungs. It is a good few minutes before he can sit up to face the doctor, doubt and relief warring in clear eyes. His fingers flutter over where Hannibal's hands were, and even in the fading light of dusk Hannibal can see the ugly red marks he has left on the person he loves.

"Leave," says Hannibal, averting his gaze. Shame creeps into his gut and taints everything sour. "Go to Matthew's. He'll take you in, I'm sure of it. I won't come after you."

On seeing Hannibal's bleak expression, Will leans forward for him. His voice is hoarse and raw. "Hannibal-"

"Don't," Hannibal grits out and shoulders Will aside roughly. His control is unraveling. "Don't touch me."

Disregarding his words, Will comes back and hugs him fiercely. Hannibal doesn't speak but just pushes him away. Despite Hannibal's second and third attempts to shove him off, the young man keeps on returning to him, and each embrace is tighter and more vehement.

Finally Hannibal crumbles. He grabs Will's face and kisses him with an intensity borne of anguish. To his astonishment, Will responds with equal fervor and passion. Their teeth cut each other's lips in their ferocity; the tang of blood and the sting of the cut grounds Hannibal in the moment. This is not an illusion, not a coping strategy; he hasn't murdered Will, his mind is intact, Will is alive and he knows *and he has not left him*.

The doctor pulls Will into his lap and his hands grope up the young man's shirts to his bare skin, mapping out the scars that he has come to know better than his own. Will immediately wraps his legs around him, as though afraid that Hannibal will leave; his arms circle the older man and his fingers claw into Hannibal's back, like he wants to sink them into the doctor's flesh to tether them together. Hannibal tastes blood and the bitter salt of tears. He could have lost this. Lost having Will in his arms, alive and fervent and consuming. The savage kisses grow gentler and eventually they are just holding onto each other, neither willing to let go for even a second. Will is still wheezing, a roughness to his breathing that slices at Hannibal with each inhalation

"I was so afraid I'd lose you-" Will confesses.

"I am not a good man-" Hannibal presses the words into Will's brow, his confession acid on his tongue.

Will mouths at Hannibal's jaw. "-I want you to be safe-"

"-you deserve everything good-" This is whispered to the space between Will's eyes.

"-I'd rather die than lose you." Will rasps out to Hannibal's lips.

"-why did you stay?" Hannibal cradles Will's head and rests their brows together, their breaths mingling. There's a dampness on his cheeks, but Hannibal isn't certain if the tears are Will's or his or theirs. "Why are you still here? I'm a monster, Will, you must realize that."

"I know," says Will. He tightens his embrace. "I'm not afraid of you."

"Perhaps you should be."

*****

Before Will can answer, the door to the study is opened and three men strode in, as though they owned the place.

Hannibal and Will scramble to their feet. Hannibal backs away, taking Will with him until their backs are to the desk. "Who are you?"

"Good afternoon, Dr Lecter. Mr Mason wishes to see you and your boyfriend," says the one in a navy blue felt hat. He sounds Italian. The men spread out.

"Stay behind me," Hannibal orders Will. To the intruders, he says, "We refuse the invitation."

"It is not your place to refuse, Dr Lecter," says Hat Guy. Will assumes he is the head henchmen.

The youngest one comes towards them. The look on his face is ugly and disdainful. Hannibal grabs something off the table and pushes Will down. He then sweeps the young man's legs out from under him before jamming something in his neck. Once the young man falls, the other two rushes the doctor simultaneously.

Will stares at Hannibal fighting, keenly aware of the near-inhuman speed at which the older man moves. Hannibal is vividly alive, his eyes alight with a dark focus that Will has never witnessed. He is reminded of a tiger, challenged by lesser predators. It is a vicious dance, Hannibal's lithe form and deadly intensity creating flawless poetry in motion. Will is shocked at the admiration that rushes into his gut and floods his veins.

He is outnumbered, however. With a grunt, Hannibal throws the bulkier man over his shoulder and dislocates his opponent's right arm, but Hat Guy sneaks up and tases the doctor in the ribs, flooring him.

"Hannibal!" Will darts forward, but Hat Guy pulls out a gun and points it at him. Will halts and holds his hands up. He meets Hannibal's eyes, sees the slow blink for Will to surrender, and steps back.

"What did he-" The young man that Hannibal stabbed in the beginning yanks out the scalpel that was stuck in his neck. Blood sprays out over Will's face and he flinches.

Amused, Hannibal's upper lip curls. "He really shouldn't have done that."

Hat Guy tases Hannibal again and the doctor collapses. When the two other men go to their injured comrade, Will rushes to Hannibal's side and tries to help him up. He hears them

calling "Piero, Piero!" and assumes that it's the young man who's probably going to die. Even Will knows arterial cuts are fatal.

So this is what Hannibal can do.

He freezes when he feels the cold press of a gun muzzle on the back of his skull.

"Stand up and stay in front of Santi," says Hat Guy. "Try anything funny and we'll shoot your precious doctor."

Santi grabs Will by his arm and yanks him away from Hannibal. Will stands, and watches Santi and Hat Guy drag Hannibal up. The doctor's head lolls forward, his fringe falling free of the product he uses.

"What about Piero's body, Carlo?" Santi asks. He's sweaty and smells of foul cigarettes. Will wrinkles his nose.

Hat Guy Carlo hesitates. "Boy, you hold up your Dr Lecter. Santi, you take Piero."

*****

"Ah! Great, Carlo, you've brought our guests just in time for the evening feeding!"

The whole place stinks of and sounds like pigs. He's made to climb up in front of Carlo and Santi, who are hauling Hannibal up roughly. There are two German Shepherds chained to the railings around the metal platform, wide-eyed and alert, growling as they approach; Will instantly tenses. He likes dogs, but not when they have been trained to be aggressive. The platform is not very large, and from his vantage point Will sees pens of pigs below the platform, arranged like a maze, and an ornate mirror is hung above the opening.

The entire place gives him the creeps, which is compounded by the man who is now studying Hannibal. Will stares at the expensively-dressed man with the crazy hair and crazier eyes on the platform. He has a handsome face, but there's a cruel edge to the features. Yet the man is *not* insane; his gaze is far too sharp to be merely mad. Will sees the small folding knife the man is tapping against his thigh and realizes that it's worse than he thought.

He and Hannibal are in the hands of an intelligent sadist.

The wild-haired man scowls. "Is he unconscious?"

"Tasered him twice."

"Hmm. Well, put him in the suit." The man steps out of the way and then twirls around to face Will. "Hello. I'm Mason Verger. You must be Will Graham, the doctor's little boytoy. I've seen your pictures with him in the papers."

"Join the club," says Will. He peers around Mason. "What are you doing with Hannibal?"

They have trussed him up in what appears to be a straitjacket, his arms tied behind him with leather straps. Will starts towards him but Mason thrusts an arm out and stops him from

taking another step. "Carlo and Santi are helping me get Dr Hannibal Lecter ready for the pigs."

Will turns to stare at him, completely confused.

Mason grips him by his chin and leers. "Hmm. Pretty eyes. I see why he likes you so much. Set it up, Santi."

There is a sound of chains and metal; Hannibal is hoisted upright by chains secured to the straitjacket. Santi maneuvers the crane that holds Hannibal until his toes are no longer on the platform. The doctor blinks, lizard-slow, but conscious. Will can't help the relief that floods his system. Mason looks over, a falsely bright grin on his face, and then grabs Will by the back of his neck and drags him over to face Hannibal.

"The good doctor is awake! Halle-*lu*-jah," Mason says. He tuts when Will struggles, and shakes his head at Hannibal. "You know, we could've had such good times. We have so many things in common. I mean, look at your boy! He's *adorable*. A little too old for my tastes, of course, but young meat is so *tender*. And look how rough you play. I like that in a man."

Belatedly Will realizes Mason is talking about the reddened marks on his neck, and then greater comprehension dawns on Will.

A little old for my tastes. Young meat is so tender.

He feels bile rising in his throat and tries to twist away, but again the muzzle of Carlo's gun nudges the back of his skull.

"You're so very young. Does he make you call him daddy? I bet he does. I bet," Mason says, leaning in far too close, his breath hot and nauseating on Will's skin, "he ties you up and fucks you while you cry and beg daddy to stop, and afterwards he makes you thank him. Because you've been a good little boy."

It is sickening. It's very obvious what Mason Verger does now, and Will feels a familiar rage suffuse him. Another bully who traumatizes those who can't fight for themselves yet. His fear is pushed out by his anger.

"Mr Verger," Will says, not averting his gaze, "if you regularly abduct therapists to to discuss your personal trauma, I suggest you learn how to operate a phone."

For that sarcastic retort, Will's face is gripped by Mason's surprisingly steady hands and then the man licks a stripe up Will's face to his right eye. Will flinches away, disgusted. He swipes at the wet stripe with his sleeve repeatedly. Mason grins and adjusts his glasses. "Someone's been crying. What I wouldn't give for a martini now. Two olives and flavored with tears, mm-mm-mmm."

"I hope you choke on your olives," Will says with a small sneer.

"You've got a smart mouth, boyo." The smirk disappears from Mason's face. "Be careful I don't stuff something hard into it."

"I'd chew it up and spit it out in your face," Will snarls. "What do you want from us?"

"Not you, exactly. Him," says Mason, swiveling on his heel to face the bound doctor. "Dr Lecter, you subverted me. You helped Margot find a loophole in Daddy's will and got my sister pregnant. I oughta report you and have your license revoked."

"I have never had sex with Margot. As for the rest, I'm not allowed to divulge anything," says Hannibal. He sounds slurred, but his eyes are attentive enough. "Doctor-patient confidentiality."

"Mm. This is why I asked Margot who taught her to get herself pregnant. I must say, she is getting better under your care. She only became awfully chatty after nearly drowning five times. It used to only take two times." Mason folds his arms. "In any case, the baby's gone. Which leaves us with you."

"If your ax to grind is with me alone, let Will go. He has nothing to do with this." Hannibal looks Mason in the eyes and smiles. It's almost as though they are in the psychiatrist's office instead of on this stinking platform. Hannibal sounds eminently reasonable, though his words still meld into one another with a heavy European touch, which Will hears only in the wee hours of the morning.

Mason Verger tilts his head. "Awww... You lovebirds. It's so romantic. Daddy was just like that, except with mom, because obviously, he wasn't a faggot. Carlo!"

The gun is taken away from Will's head. Instead, a tactical knife is stuffed into Will's hands. The young man takes it instinctively, and then looks at Mason. "Why am I holding this knife?"

"Simple thing. See, Dr Lecter forced me to hurt my sister. And I love my sister, a lot. An *awful* lot. She's been my favorite since she was four. So, in the same spirit, I have to force someone he loves to hurt him."

Will almost laughs. He's already been over this earlier. "I'd die before I hurt him."

"Not gonna happen." Mason rolls his shoulders. "I mean, you're going to die. Both of you. My pigs, they're hungry. They've been starved the whoooooole day. So yes, you are going to hurt him, and then you will die. Now step on up here, right in front of your precious doctor daddy."

"Your pigs eat people?" Will asks. Hannibal is becoming more and more alert with each second.

"Meat is meat," says Mason.

Carlo holds up the gun, a silent reminder for Will not to try anything funny. Will stands in front of Hannibal and looks up. Hannibal gazes at him, unafraid and open, and Will falls into the abyss of the older man's eyes. There is a scarlet flicker of emotion.

I am not a good man. I am a monster.

I'd rather die than lose you.

Mason coos at his dogs and tosses them some treats before he sits down in a plush armchair. "So here's the thing. You can cut Dr Lecter's throat deeply so that he dies pretty damn fast, or you can cut him shallow to add *a leetle sauce*, yes?" No one, not even Carlo, seems impressed by his put-on accent. He huffs. "The pigs will eat him either way. It's up to you how much your sugar daddy's going to suffer."

"What makes you think I'll cut him at all if you're going to kill us both?"

Mason smirks. Will wants to slice his face off. "Here's the deal. If you cut Dr Lecter's throat and ends his suffering, you die slow. Feel every piggy chomp before your body finally gives up the ghost. If you decide on shallow cuts on him, just get some blood flowing, well, you get a quick, pretty painless death. Blam! A bullet to the brain."

"So... either he dies a painful death, or I do?"

"Bingo." Mason Verger leans back in his chair and feeds his German Shepherds some meat jerky from his pocket. "I do so like the smart ones. So, I'm gonna give you ten seconds, and then, if that knife doesn't move, Santi will swing the crane out and lower Dr Lecter to the pigs, and you'll both die slow."

*****

Hannibal watches Will come closer. Their eyes meet.

One way or another, this is going to hurt.

"Do what you have to, Will," says Hannibal, soft affection in his tone. Pollack had nothing on the exquisite perfection that is Will spattered with blood. It is even more magnificent, seeing the emotion in blue-gray eyes transmute and harden into resolve.

"Ten seconds starting... now!" Mason calls out cheerfully from his seat.

Will's lips twitch into something close to a smile. He pulls Hannibal in for what appears to be a final kiss. Instead, he swings the doctor around, cuts the leather bonds in one clean swipe, and presses the knife into Hannibal's hand without a pause.

"Carlo!"

*****

There is a gunshot and Will collapses. The pigs start screaming and shrieking, startled by the blast. Hannibal doesn't pause to look at his fallen lover. Instead he grabs Santi and breaks his thick neck efficiently, using the corpse as a meat shield to absorb the two shots that Carlo fires while he pulls his arms free of the straitjacket.

Carlo doesn't get a fourth try. Will trips the man up by yanking his ankle to the side. The gun clatters out of his hands. Immediate threat gone, Hannibal drops Santi's body onto the roof of the pens; the pigs squeal even more, rushing about in an agitated frenzy at the meal they can

smell but cannot reach. The doctor doesn't hesitate to bury the knife in his hand into Carlo's back, sliding neatly between his ribs and into the soft tissue within.

"Carlo!" Mason is already on his feet, his own knife unfolded. He rushes Hannibal before the latter has stood up fully, but the psychiatrist is more than ready for him, using Mason's momentum against to bowl him over. Mason lands next to Will who has propped himself up on one elbow, trying to reach for something behind him. When Mason turns to stab Will, he is met with a gun muzzle pressed to his forehead instead. Will's hand is steady, and his gaze is diamond-hard.

Will bares his teeth. "Drop the knife, Mr Verger."

Mason drops the knife.

"Now stand up." Will keeps the gun on the man; this close, he doesn't need good aim. "Hannibal?"

"Of course," says Hannibal, and drapes his arm around the front of Mason's shoulders, the tactical knife precariously close to the latter's jugular. "Do you need help standing up, Will?"

"I'm fine. It hurts, but it's not bleeding too badly," says Will, loud enough to be heard over the yowling dogs and shrieking pigs. It is not determination in his gaze, Hannibal realizes, but glorious, incandescent *wrath*, nearly crackling from the young man's skin. Will keeps the gun pointing at Mason Verger, and the feral smile on his face never wavers. "Tie him up, Hannibal. I want him to reflect on why trying to kill you is a very, *very* bad idea."

Hannibal falls in love all over again.

*****

"Let me see the wound."

It's a fairly long graze, but it will heal after it's treated properly. Hannibal rips off part of Carlo's shirt to wrap around Will's bicep to staunch the bleeding and then helps the young man into his coat again. The two regard each other, conscious of how close they have come to death once more.

Hannibal brushes his thumbs over Will's eyelids and whispers, "You see so clearly now."

For the first time, Will not only sees clearly what has to be done, he also feels completely in control of himself. He senses disgust and rage at Mason Verger, relief and love for Hannibal, and a disquieting calm in himself. There is a surprising lack of fear, and he wonders where it has gone.

"What shall we do with them?" Will asks quietly, barely audible over the racket of hogs screaming for their dinner. The two German Shepherds are barking madly and Hannibal is tempted to shoot them, but Will still has the gun.

Hannibal blocks out the barking. "Let's get rid of Carlo first."

They hoist the dead man onto the crane contraption. Will watches impassively as the corpse is lowered into the opening of the pig pen maze; he does grimace when he sees all the hogs rushing forward to devour the dead body, but he never looks away. Once fed, the pigs snuffle off to their corners of the pen maze happily. The noise dies down, leaving only the dogs' wild barking and growling.

To Hannibal's delight, Will glares at them and shushes both instantly with a snapped command. The dogs sit, and when Will approaches, they crouch and begin to whimper. It is spellbinding. There is a strange cast to his features, as though a shell has formed over his skin.

Hannibal fancies that if he touches Will now, his finger will encounter cold marble rather than yielding flesh. "What are you thinking of, Will?"

"Meat is meat," Will mutters. He then looks over his shoulder at Mason Verger. The repellent man has been hog-tied and gagged, using the leather and metal chains from the straitjacket he put Hannibal in. "He tried to kill you."

"He tried to kill us both."

Stalking over to the trussed up man, Will cocks the gun and angles it at Mason's left temple. Hannibal places his hand over it before Will can fire it.

"No, Will," says the psychiatrist tenderly. "His death will cause a great deal of harm to his sister."

"Margot?" Will regards Hannibal. The eyes are the same stormy blue-gray gems, but the mind behind it has been altered. "This man deserves to die. He's hurt *children,* Hannibal. And he's not the least bit sorry for all he's done."

The older man nods. "Yes, he does deserve death, and if he dies, my patient will lose all she has."

"He's abused her," says Will. He stares at Mason and his face twists. "He enjoyed hurting her, hurting them. If you think I'll let a monster like that out into the world-"

"-what do you want to do to him, mon amour?" Hannibal interrupts. "How would you want to punish him?"

"I want him dead, but that's out of the question, I suppose." Will pauses. "I want him to never be able to touch another human being again. I want his outside to reflect his twisted insides."

Hannibal is enchanted. "Let me do it."

The young man turns to look at him, his eyes full of emotion. "Why?"

"You're not like me, mongoose," says Hannibal with a small, proud smile. "You are a protector. You have protected. Let me be your hands. Let me do the rest."

He does not miss the sharp intake of breath. His Will is brilliant. The young man whispers, "You're a true sadist, aren't you? You like doling out pain."

They are above the Vergers' man-eating pigs' pens. They are about to torture another human being. Yet Hannibal finds himself and Will caught in a bubble of intimacy, true intimacy, where honesty and openness is mandatory. There are no walls here; Hannibal knows that if he throws up one now, he is going to lose Will.

"For certain purposes, yes," Hannibal admits in a low voice. "Pain can be cleansing and clarifying." It feels refreshing to be fully open to another person. Hannibal muses that Bedelia would be amazed that he can be so vulnerable to another living being.

"Do you get off on it?" Will asks.

"I find it emotionally cathartic, not sexually fulfilling." Hannibal cups Will's cheek, still painted with flecks of blood. "You don't have to stay for this."

Will shakes his head. "I want to watch you work. Watch you create." He gulps and lowers his gaze to his feet, almost coy in his demeanor. "I thought... This morning, after the initial horror passed... I thought she looked beautiful."

Hannibal can't help the purr of pride in his chest. Rolling Mason to lie on his side, the doctor says, "Forgive me if I seemed reluctant. This is the first time I've performed for another person."

*****

As Hannibal carves into Mason, Will can't tear his eyes away.

Horror gnaws at him, but its fangs are dull. What Will feels is exhilaration, both his own and Hannibal's. Through some uncanny process of amalgamation, Will can see himself holding the knife, sawing away at Mason's face; he feels Hannibal's calm delight in meting out punishment to a man who tried to harm them. This is different from the times he's empathized with the bully in his mind; this time, the receiving party deserves it.

It feels *righteous*.

A peace washes through Will, as though he is in his stream, Hannibal behind him. Will blinks, and he is still seated in the chair, Hannibal is still crouched over Mason Verger, and the skies are very dark outside the pens. Yet the young man feels connected to Hannibal in a manner more personal than what they shared last night in bed. Perhaps it is: Will is in Hannibal's head space, that eerie, blank focus of an artist in his creative zone, his design emerging from the canvas before him. Hannibal is no longer alone; Will is in him, watching, acting, creating.

Piece by piece they hack away the handsome face and toss the bloody scraps to the dogs, and when there is hardly any face left for the knife, Hannibal cuts off Mason's nose and flings it into the pigpen. A brief scuffle and it is soon gobbled up by one of the pigs. Mason Verger

has long since passed out from the agony, but his face now matches the twisted, hideous soul within.

A deep, dark part of Will applauds the show. The rest of Will thinks that Hannibal should always be awash in blood, he looks so elegant in red.

"He still has the use of his hands," he points out quietly. "He can still touch others."

A quick and expert snap of the man's neck settles that. Hannibal stands, terrible and beautiful as a primordial god, his fingers and palms red. Off Will's expression, Hannibal says, "He's alive."

"I wasn't, um, I wasn't doubting that," says Will, a flush creeping into his cheeks, looking more like the Will Graham that Hannibal left that morning. "I just... I should be worried that I found that really, um. Really hot."

*****

They drive off in the car that had been used to drive them to the Verger estate. Mason Verger is unlikely to be missed so soon; if anything, Will bets that any of the household staff is more than happy to hope that their employer is away for the night. He should learn how to drive too. It can't be *that* hard, morons drive all the time.

He probably won't learn in Hannibal's Bentley, though.

"Will he report us?" he asks Hannibal. He has not let go of Hannibal's hand on the gear shift since the drive started. A tiny part of him is frantically screaming at Will to release the hand and escape from the moving vehicle. He squashes that voice with extreme prejudice. He wants nowhere else but to be beside his older lover.

Hannibal does not appear worried. "He feeds his pigs human corpses. If he reports us, that neat tidbit will go out to the public, and the entire Verger dynasty will collapse. No, he is more likely to seek vengeance himself."

"You sound as though that's nothing to worry about."

"It isn't. He's cunning, but not as cunning as I can be." Hannibal glances over at Will, and his gaze softens. "Honestly, I'm more concerned about us. Our relationship, if you still wish for one, now that you've seen me do what I do."

Will is silent, but he laces their fingers together until they get home.

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They see to Will's wound first. It is a nasty but shallow gash; Hannibal cleans it out carefully with antiseptic and dresses the area with a waterproof bandage. Will is silent throughout the treatment, but he keeps one hand on Hannibal's knee as the doctor works. Hannibal isn't sure if it's meant to reassure Will or himself.

"I'm dirty," Will mutters, rubbing his cheek where Mason licked it. Hannibal stands to leave, but Will holds on to his hand and asks, in a small voice, "Shower with me?"

Hannibal can't say no to that.

*****

They stand together under the spray of the rain shower, Hannibal carefully massaging shampoo from Will's scalp. The young man hasn't spoken since they stepped in. When the last of the suds are rinsed out, Will smiles at Hannibal faintly. "Your turn."

The doctor is unable to relax. While Will scrubs down his back and shoulders, Hannibal keeps thinking of the livid red marks on Will's neck, and the young man's strangely vacant expression. Caught up in his own thoughts, he's taken by surprise when Will wraps thin arms from behind around his waist, one hand splayed over his heart.

"Will?"

"We can't keep almost losing each other," Will says. "It's not healthy. My heart can't take this."

Hannibal turns in to face Will, and is assaulted by Will's lips. The doctor is pushed back until they meet tiled wall, and then Will bites down on Hannibal's lower lip. Hannibal pulls away with a grimace, and Will shoves the older man against the wall again to kiss him. When they separate, Hannibal's breath is stolen for a second. Will looks nearly deranged, dark hair in his eyes, skin pale and mottled at the throat, blood dripping from his mouth.

He looks dangerous.

"Fuck me," Will says, his voice low and threatening.

Hannibal grabs him for another rough kiss, copper-tainted and delicious; his hands roam freely over Will's slender and yielding form, kneading into the curve of the young man's ass and gently rubbing over his entrance. "Aren't you sore from last night?"

"I don't care," Will hisses. "Fuck me, Hannibal. Right now." He chokes and adds, sounding more like himself, "I need you in me."

With a low groan Hannibal switches their positions and pins Will's arms to the wall. "I won't hurt you. Not again." His gaze falls to Will's throat and self-loathing creeps in. An alien emotion that taints the very air bitter and foul. "Never again.

"I need you," Will says, pleads, begs. "Please, Hannibal, I need you. I can't feel anything. I want you to help me feel."

Hannibal falls to his knees and takes hold of Will's half-erect cock with his mouth. He licks and sucks fervently, forgoing skill for passion; Will responds with eager enthusiasm, his fingers twisting into Hannibal's hair. His pelvis jerks forward with every suck and Hannibal lets Will fuck his mouth inexpertly. Rivulets of water run down their bodies and into

Hannibal's mouth; he pushes his tongue out to prod against the velvet skin of Will's scrotum as he swallows Will into him completely.

"Fuck!" Will grunts, and comes and comes down Hannibal's throat.

*****

Wrapped in a thick bathing robe, Will watches Hannibal from the seat in the kitchen where the psychiatrist is preparing dinner. He asked for eggs earlier; he doesn't think he can stomach meat at the moment. Hannibal is thus making a mushroom omelette and glazing baby carrots in another pan.

Meat is meat.

The thought should nauseate him. Will has a suspicion that it will, later. At the moment, he feels wrung out and empty. Perhaps that's why everything is gray-edged. He does feel more present now, though, after the blowjob Hannibal gives him in the bathroom. He wonders if Hannibal feels the same. More grounded.

"Omelettes." Hannibal places a plate on the low table along with eating utensils.

"What about you?"

"I don't feel hungry," says Hannibal.

Will frowns. "Have you eaten since you left to see Margot at the hospital?"

Hannibal has to think. "I had lunch when I got back. A sandwich."

"Don't punish yourself with hunger, Hannibal. Please have dinner," says Will. Later, it will strike him how odd it is that Hannibal obeys him instantly.

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Tired as they are, Will helps Hannibal clean up Piero's blood, pulling out half a shelf of books where arterial spray has contaminated the covers, and then assists in rolling up the rug to be burned at a later time. The young man then stays out of the room as Hannibal mops the floor with bleach. He's consciously choosing not to think of anything beyond this moment. He wonders why he's doing that.

He watches Hannibal finish up the last bit near the desk and says, "I can't believe I was ever afraid of scarring your floors with my boots."

"I did keep trying to invite you in for a drink, Will Graham," says Hannibal primly. He looks very domestic in the exercise, with his shirt sleeves rolled to his elbows and fringe flopping in his eyes. His eyes crinkle in that not-a-smile that he has, but Will can tell it's an act. It's so easy to read Hannibal now; he wonders why he hasn't ever seen the mask before.

"What would have happened if I had accepted your invitations back then?" he asks curiously.

"I'd have started getting to know you earlier." Hannibal mulls over the question. "I probably would have fallen for you much earlier too, though I don't know if it would have been the same on your part, of course."

"Would you have killed me?" Will's tone is placid, as though he is truly comfortable with the idea of being killed and eaten.

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Hannibal supposes the question is valid. The psychiatrist wonders what thoughts are going through Will's mind.

"You were very polite and a good worker, Will. I wouldn't have considered it at all," says Hannibal quietly.

"So you kill those who are rude." The young man is remarkably fast at unlocking Hannibal. By now Hannibal has accepted that the walls of his defenses are impregnable to all but Will, and again his young lover proves it. "And since rude comes in all shapes and sizes, there isn't a pattern for the police to find. That's... brilliant."

"With your insights, I am sincerely thankful that you have opted to stay, instead of going to the police." Hannibal smiles as he wipes down the surfaces in the study. He will miss some of the books, but they can be replaced. For the two that are first editions Hannibal will send them to his other home in Florence. Once he is satisfied that their home is once again pristine, he asks, "Why didn't you go to them?"

"I don't really know," says Will. Hannibal studies him; in that moment, Will looks young and lost. "I just can't bear the thought of losing you."

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Hannibal is quite gratified to know that Will still wants to sleep in their bedroom. They strip the sheets - "I was too busy freaking out to change it, sorry" - and put on clean ones. Once they are in bed, Will snuggles close to Hannibal and drops off to sleep almost immediately. The older man watches Will. Fatigue pulls at Hannibal but he can't bring himself to close his eyes for long, fearful that this miracle is only a specter of his mind.

Will is warm and pliant against him, one arm thrown over Hannibal's body and the other curled under his chin. He looks terribly young and worn out. Hannibal wants to seal them in this room forever. The look in those lovely eyes when he demands retribution on Mason... Will's darkness is blinding.

Hannibal has to laugh at himself. This young man was only a curiosity at first, and then an obsession. Now Hannibal can't help wanting to make him happy, to keep him satisfied, to

please him. For someone who chafes at the thought of his liberty restricted, Hannibal has found himself a jailer.

A lovely garden with high walls and no exits, he thinks, running a finger along the young man's jaw, *is a prison nonetheless.*

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In Will's dream, he is in the middle of the stream in the middle of a summer day. The water is busy with fish. His father watches reproachfully from the bank, too far away for his voice to be heard. Hannibal is beside him, incongruously and impeccably dressed in a sky-blue three-piece suit; he's standing in the manner of an observer, hands behind his back. Will is holding a fishing rod, and he's securing the lure he finished for his father, so long ago it feels like another lifetime.

"We name all our lures," Will informs Hannibal. "Name it after people we cherish. It'll come back if the person cherishes us in turn."

The doctor tilts his head quizzically.

"I've made lures but I've never named them." Will looks at him with a smile. "This is the only one I've ever put a name to."

"What do you call it?"

"What do you think?" Will laughs, and kisses Hannibal. He never stops kissing the older man, even as the full moon replaces the sun in the sky and the river turns to blood. It looks black in moonlight. Will dips his hand into the warm liquid and paints Hannibal's face with it, lines of red so dark that it looks like tar. Hannibal lets him, and then pulls him close for another kiss, before toppling them both under the surface of the blood river.

He wakes up briefly, disoriented, clutching Hannibal's arm which has been draped over his middle.

"Hannibal?" he breathes. "We drowned."

"Hush, mon amour, we are fine. Go back to sleep," Hannibal whispers, and brushes a feather-light kiss on his brow.

Will pulls himself to rest on Hannibal's chest. He thinks he can hear Hannibal's heartbeat, pressed so intimately to him, and lets the steady pulse lull him back to slumber. If he dreams again, he does not remember them.

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The morning of Christmas Eve comes too soon. They don't move from the bed, though they are sitting up; Will's legs are tangled with Hannibal's, and he savors the feel of silk on his

bare skin. He knows that they cannot stay here forever. The world still exists. Will's bandage needs changing. Hannibal is still a murderer and a cannibal.

They look at each other, each categorizing and analyzing minute shifts in expression. Will doesn't remember the last time he has looked in someone's eyes this intently. He wants to drink in Hannibal's face forever, memorize every faint wrinkle, the sharp cheekbones, the sensual curve of that cruel mouth. He wants to watch Hannibal grow older, until his hair is silvered snow, and lovely lines full of stories and smiles are etched into his exquisite face.

He wants to grow old with Hannibal.

He trails his fingers over Hannibal's arm and traces the veins in his beautiful hand. Will knows how skillful those hands can be, in healing, cooking and killing. He wants to know more. Now is a good time as any other to find out. "When did you start killing?"

"In my teens." Hannibal doesn't elaborate.

Will lets his mind wander and it lights on the piece of music Hannibal once played for him on the harpsichord. He curls closer to Hannibal, their breath mingling, and laces his fingers with the doctor's. There is no gentle way to say this. "Mischa was eaten."

Hannibal tenses. It is after a long moment before he relaxes. "Yes. But that is not the reason why I do what I do."

"Why do you choose to?" Will thinks about his own question. Yes, it has been a choice from the start. Hannibal chose to kill and eat those who killed Mischa and ate her. Because they deserved it; they were monsters. And then he chose to keep on killing and eating his kills, because they deserved no better.

"Because life is precious," Hannibal replies somberly, echoing what Will said yesterday. "I hate to see it wasted."

Will smiles faintly. "By rude people?"

Hannibal mirrors the tiny smile. "Discourtesy is unspeakably ugly. I have had enough of ugliness in my life to not want more."

Life is wasted on those who don't create beauty. The young man blinks a few times and then rubs his thumb over Hannibal's lower lip. "Did you kill Robert Ashton?"

"He drugged you."

"You're a scary boyfriend." Will's gaze lower to where their hands are clasped together. "You're like a samurai sword, grace and death in one elegant package."

"You're rather frightening yourself, mon rêve." The older man leans in and kisses Will. "You have no idea how much power you have over me. How much control."

A low heat spreads through Will's loins as he remembered the night before, when he basically helped Hannibal kill two men and then take apart a man while Will watches. He swallows

dryly and mutters, "I think I do."

"Are you regretting what we did? Do you feel guilty?"

"No. I don't. I feel guilty that I don't feel guilty. Like I know I should, because what we did isn't good, but I feel..." Will searches for the word. Finally he alights on: "I feel righteous."

"Doing bad things to bad people makes us feel good," says Hannibal quietly.

Will allows a smirk. "That's one simplified way of looking at things."

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Hannibal is still walking a tightrope, balancing his emotions. While Will assured him last night that he won't leave, this is a new day, and he has had more time to process what happened. He knows he will never forget that he tried to strangle Will - the recollection makes his blood run cold - and, even more damning, he can't forget how Will kept his eyes on Hannibal throughout it all. There was no fear or blame.

Hannibal has thought that he never wants to see horror in those eyes. He never expected love and forgiveness to strike ten times as hard.

"Can you take me to the basement?" the young man asks, aware that Hannibal is thinking, but not privy to the substance of his thoughts. There is an unfathomable glimmer in those storm-blue eyes now as Will studies the doctor.

Hannibal hesitates. That, in itself, is telling. He is used to complete privacy in his studio; his performance with Mason but a fragment of his repertoire. Letting Will go with him to where he crafts his art will be allowing the young man fully comprehend the darkness that Hannibal masks with bright-colored outfits and flamboyance. Letting Will see the monster beneath the person suit.

"Have you not got your fill when you went down yesterday?" he asks, trying to sound nonchalant. From the look on Will's face, he has failed to fool the young man. Dr Bedelia Du Maurier with all her tricks cannot do what Will Graham can effortlessly. "Why do you wish to see her corpse again?"

"Because she's not just a corpse, is she?" Will replies thoughtfully. He grimaces mildly. "I don't know. I freaked out when I first saw that, and the stuff in the fridge and the chiller... But I didn't freak out over the presence of a corpse, as I did over the thought that you were the one doing all this."

Hannibal parses the information. "You were more shocked at my being a killer than of the body itself."

"It's creepy, I admit, and the meat does not help, but the more I think of how you've presented her, the more lovely-" Will catches himself using the word, and winces. "Yeah. She's um. I see what you've done. She's not only... not only meat. She's art."

Smiling rather grimly, Hannibal shakes his head. "You may be the only one who's ever seen that."

"I don't... I'm not-I never was that normal. Guess I now have proof."

"You," Hannibal says, "are not like them. Normal is for the dullards of the world. They are pigs. You are unique."

"Yay for me. I'm weird."

"You can never be more weird than I am," Hannibal says. "Trust me on that, mon rêve."

To Hannibal's relief, Will laughs.

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She is still lovely, Will muses. He holds on to Hannibal's hand and does not let go; he still has that chill up the back of his neck at the thought that she'll start talking once he turns his back on her.

"What do you plan to do with her?" Will inquires.

Hannibal cocks his head. "She was meant to be set up last night at the observatory. We were otherwise occupied, unfortunately."

"We could do it tonight," Will says. "No one's gonna be working tonight."

Hannibal notices the first pronoun and pulls Will to lean against himself. "She was to be my last kill. I never wanted you to know this side of me."

"It'll have been easier, not knowing, but then I would rather know all of you than only part of you. She still can be your last," says Will. Then he rests his head on Hannibal's shoulder. "You don't have to do it, right? Kill people?"

"It is not a compulsion, no. I confess I enjoy the process, and the elevation of the fruits of my labor." He sighs. "It is an acquired taste, but my skills are not limited to it."

"So we stop with her," says Will. Then his voice hardens. "Unless Mason Verger sends people after us, in which case I'll kill the scumbag myself. Or, you know, if we meet someone who deserves it, like Mason does." He chews thoughtfully on his lower lip. "I'll want to watch them be punished, Hannibal. But we won't eat them, because that's just really gross, even though you cook like a dream."

"If you wish it so, mon amour." Hannibal exhales. He steps off the tightrope onto solid ground. So Freddie Lounds is to be the final act of the Chesapeake Ripper. She would've killed herself for not getting the chance to cover the story personally. Hannibal finds that very appropriate retribution.

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Leaving Will to his beloved Blüthner, Hannibal drives the car to a parking lot in a less savory part of town, leaving it unlocked and then discarding the key, and walks three blocks away to catch a cab home.

They have zrazai for lunch, and the doctor is pleased that Will does eat what's offered. Lounds had strong legs and the meat is lean. They both know they're eliminating the evidence. When they read the news on the tablet, they see headlines on how Mason Verger, head of the Verger empire, has been viciously attacked by his own dogs and is under intensive care. There is nothing on a man eaten by pigs in the pen.

"Will Margot be okay with Mason when she returns home?" Will asks as he dries the dishes. "She'll have to take care of her brother now if she wants to have access to the fortune, right?"

Hannibal passes him the last plate. "I'm sure she'll take care of him the same way he took care of her."

"Good." The young man smiles, fox-like, and kisses Hannibal once the last plate is put away.

They don't make it to the bedroom.

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"Will you always give me what I want?" asks Will when they have come home from the observatory. They are curled in the sitting room again, an assortment of Christmas gifts spread before them; it is way past midnight, after all, so it's technically Christmas morning, and Will is too keyed up to sleep.

"Yes."

"So if I want a dog..."

"We'll pick one out after Christmas." Hannibal cocks his head and narrows his eyes. "Not in the house, though. I refuse to have dog hair on my furniture."

Will can't help the embarrassed and pleased smile. "You'll spoil me," he warns.

"You're worth spoiling." The doctor regards his lover seriously. "You're worth everything I can give."

"You'll regret saying that when I bring home a dozen dogs."

"I have never regretted what I have done, save for this." Hannibal touches the bruising on Will's throat, guilt coloring his tone. "I would undo it if I could."

Will feels the warmth of Hannibal's hand resting at the base of his neck and places a hand over it. He knows that Hannibal knows he's forgiven. He is also aware that Hannibal is unlikely to ever forget it, nor fully forgive himself. For someone who calls himself a monster,

Hannibal loves too deeply and too completely; Will does not even dare comprehend how he can repay this devotion.

"You give me too much power over you, Hannibal," Will whispers, feeling overwhelmed. "I don't know if that's wise."

"It is my choice to give it." Hannibal slides off the sofa and goes onto his knees, bracketed by Will's legs, clasping Will's hands and kissing the knuckles with reverence. It is done. He has placed the chain around his own neck, discarded the key, surrendered to the young man. He has never felt more free. "It is your choice what to do with what I give."

For a wild moment, Will wonders what Freddie Lounds would write if she could see Hannibal drop to his knees for a seventeen-year-old. Then he grasps Hannibal's face in both hands and kisses him fiercely, a benediction and a pledge to this terrifying and beautiful creature.

"My choice is you," he says. "My choice will always be you."

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I opted for Murder Husbands. Murder optional.
I love all of you for your kudos and comments. Thank you for your support!

Bread and Music
by Conrad Aiken

Music I heard with you was more than music,
And bread I broke with you was more than bread;
Now that I am without you, all is desolate;
All that was once so beautiful is dead.

Your hands once touched this table and this silver,
And I have seen your fingers hold this glass.
These things do not remember you, belovèd,
And yet your touch upon them will not pass.

For it was in my heart you moved among them,
And blessed them with your hands and with your eyes;
And in my heart they will remember always,—
They knew you once, O beautiful and wise.

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